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An unforgettable novel of the terrifying war in the Burmese Jungle

FRANCIS CLIFFORD

A BATTLE IS FOUGHT TO BE WON

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Deep in the Burmese jungle, the British, hopelessly outnumbered, were retreating before the fanatical hordes of the Japanese army. Tony Gilling's job, with one depleted and exhausted company, was to hold their advance for a few precious hours, to earn a brief but vital respite for the rest of the British troops. In the space of three days he learnt what it was to fight an enemy to whom death meant nothing and who tortured without compunction. Humiliated by his own failures in a world that was not his, torn between a longing for life and safety and a senseless urge to save the demented remains of his pride, he learnt finally the full torment of fear, hatred and death.

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A Battle is Fought to be Won

Francis Clifford

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For

PETER

Vivat In Pace

There were young knights among them who had never been present at a stricken field. Some could not look upon it and some could not speak and they held themselves apart from the others who were cutting down the prisoners at My Lord's orders, for the prisoners were a body too numerous to be guarded by those of us who were left.

Then Jean de Rye, an aged knight of Burgundy who had been sore wounded in the battle, rode up to the group of young knights and said: 'Are ye maidens with your downcast eyes? Look well upon it. See all of it. Close your eyes to nothing. For a battle is fought to be won. And it is this that happens if you lose.'

From a Medieval Chronicle

PART ONE

THE BRIDGE

CHAPTER ONE

GILLING crouched behind the low bank and stared across the dazzling paddy stubble towards the culvert where the road block had been set up. Daylight was little more than an hour old but already the sun-gutted Burmese plain trembled under the returning heat. Even the two bullock carts which dawn had revealed interlocked on the culvert's hump seemed to quiver slightly as if they were possessed of some vibrant inner force. There was no other hint of movement, either along the rim of the gully where the Japanese were entrenched or in the direction from which Rance's company was about to attack. The deception was complete. For as far as the eye could see not a single living thing showed itself.

Gilling lowered the binoculars and glanced nervously at his watch. Ninety seconds to go. His own company was deployed in line behind the bank and he had gone to ground beside his senior platoon commander, Subedar Nay Dun. Their eyes met briefly, then shied away. The silence was intense, broken only by the solid click of a rifle-bolt being eased home somewhere along to their left. It was as if the whole world were holding its breath; as if no one existed between them and the vast discoloured distances. And yet, within two hundred and fifty yards of where he lay, Gilling knew that Rance's men were squirming invisibly over the dead bristle of last year's rice and that the Japanese were waiting for them, flattening themselves against the brick-hard earth of the gully which skewered the road.

Seventy seconds now. He experienced a melting sen-

sation in the pit of his stomach and his palms began to ooze a chilly, unnatural sweat. This was the third successive morning that the enemy's suicide squads had been found to have penetrated behind the brigade, but it was the first time he had been involved in flushing them out. Yesterday the Sikhs had done it; the Gurkhas the day before. Now it was the Frontier Rifles' turn. Rance's company and his own. Kachins and Karens.

He focused his binoculars on the culvert again. It had been quite impossible to move in any closer. The crumbling irrigation bank which screened them from the Japanese in the gully was fronted by a tawny, ironed-out expanse that offered not the slightest vestige of cover. It was suicidal ground over which to have to attack and the longer he looked at it the more thankful he was that his task was merely to support Rance's advance with covering fire.

Forty seconds. One eyebrow raised, he shot another strained glance at Nay Dun, but except for the tell-tale twitch of a cheek muscle the Karen's toffee-coloured face was as impassive as ever. A butterfly jazzed past, chopping heavily on the silent air, but across the plain nothing stirred. The deception still held. Gilling licked his cracked lips, then screwed his head to either side. Not a man moved. The line of waiting riflemen, the Bren-gunners, the mortar crews—all had the trance-like rigidity of figures in a tableau.

He checked with his watch again. Less than twenty seconds. Each one seemed to be stretching out elastically into great lengths of time. Sweat salted the corners of his mouth and he could feel his heart beginning to thud against the cage of his ribs. For a moment or two his thoughts were filled with an intense pity for Rance. Then the tension squeezed his mind dry of every scrap

of emotion and he was only conscious of the strengthening beat of his heart measuring out the count-down.

Ten seconds . . . Nine . . . Eight . . . Seven . . .

He lifted his eyes, and in the instant of doing so he saw Rance's Kachins rising to their feet. Dwarfed by the intervening distance they sprouted suddenly from the ground, singly, in twos and threes, in clusters, and started to stumble forward.

The nearest Bren shattered Gilling's throaty cry. Almost simultaneously firing broke out along the bank like a stick whipped back and forth across railings. Craning round he saw that both mortars had already loosed off. Clumsy with haste he fixed his binoculars on the gully again, waiting for the strikes, and when the stabbing, blood-red blossoms came he saw that both were short.

Shifting half right he picked out the lanky figure of Rance in the centre of the Kachins' forward platoon. The other platoons were slightly in the rear, one on either side. All of them were well spread out, section by section, travelling at a steady jog-trot. They were still two hundred yards from the culvert, moving diagonally across Gilling's front. The binoculars brought them in very close. The sun blinked on a bayonet; on leather. Revolver in hand, stooping a little, Rance was a yard or so in the lead. He seemed strangely unconcerned, almost as if he were deaf to the firing; oblivious of danger.

The mortars were short again. Gilling bawled at the crews but his words were beaten back into his mouth by the din. The deep cough of the Brens was punctuated by the ceaseless rattle of rifles and staccato bursts from sub-machine-guns. A hot, bitter smell wafted along the bank. The air was losing its clarity, buffeting this way and that.

Rance had got to about a hundred yards from the gully. He had lengthened his stride and Gilling saw him turn his head, gesturing with both arms. The Kachins were bringing their weapons down to hip-level, thrusting the bayonets forward. Some of them were drawing their chopping knives. Here and there a man fell, hugging himself, pitching headlong as if he had tripped.

The noise was deafening. One of the mortars suddenly found the range and a mottled explosion erupted from the gully only a stone's-throw from the culvert. Wildly, Gilling shouted his relief. Beside him, Nay Dun was screaming instructions to his Bren-gunner.

Rance had less than a hundred yards to go now. He was at full stretch, his long legs pulling him clear of the leading group. More men were going down and for the first time the onward rush showed signs of faltering. The wide, blunt arrowhead was losing its shape; breaking up. Twenty yards further on and the flanking platoons started to go raggedly to earth. But Rance and the men in the centre went on, bent forward as though they were struggling into a gale.

Gilling's hands were shaking so violently that he could scarcely keep the binoculars steady. His nostrils were filled with brown dust and the drift of acrid smoke. Rance was barely sixty yards from the gully and he dared not support him much longer, yet it seemed almost criminal to lift the covering fire at such a moment. He delayed a second or two, filled with dread, then sounded three sharp blasts on his whistle. The firing ceased abruptly, as if a switch had been thrown. A brief, shocked silence enveloped the bank. Then the brittle crackle of the Japanese automatics beat against Gilling's ears and he heard the faint, child-like cries of the charging Kachins.

Rance was closing in with what was left of his leading platoon. When he was twenty-five yards from the culvert he hurled a grenade. He seemed to do it with curious, unhurried deliberation, checking in his stride as he bowled his arm over. Then Gilling realized that he had been hit. He hobbled a couple of strides, spun round and slowly subsided, clutching his thigh. Through the binoculars Gilling could see him twisting on the ground, arching his back. The few Kachins who were still on their feet carried on past him, firing from the hip, brandishing their knives. But none of them reached the gully. One by one, with dramatic suddenness, they collapsed like puppets abruptly severed from their strings.

Gilling stared at the scene in utter dismay. The power of decision seemed to have been drained from him. For a long moment his mind struggled dazedly to accept that the attack had failed. The surviving platoons would never go forward now. The most they could hope was to extricate themselves without too many losses. He understood this completely; appreciated their need for urgent support. But it was the sight of Rance, writhing slowly like a chrysalis within yards of the culvert, that numbed his brain.

Even as he looked, two Japanese scuttled from the gully and ran towards Rance's agonized figure. He caught the sharp hiss of Nay Dun's indrawn breath; felt him stiffen. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw the subedar jerk his head sideways; raise an arm in expectation of the command to open fire. But Gilling couldn't bring himself to give it. The words choked on his tongue. He found himself trapped in a state of raw-nerved bewilderment. Rance was every bit as much a target as the Japanese. With stupefied fascination he watched them grasp him by the shoulders and

drag him into the gully. It took only a few seconds but the time seemed everlasting, and all the while he was hating himself, appalled by what was happening and yet feeling powerless to prevent it.

Only when they had disappeared from view did he bark out the order. Instantly, firing rattled and spat from along the bank and the mortars planted their savage flowers around the target area. Under cover of the barrage what was left of the Kachin company began to withdraw in short, scrambling rushes. There was a leaden weight in Gilling's heart as he watched them pull back. The picture of Rance's capture remained printed on his natural vision. And when his gaze eventually met Nay Dun's again he read an accusation in the subedar's yellowed, unblinking eyes which made him want to cry out: 'What else could I have done? God Almighty, subedar, what else?'

CHAPTER TWO

FORTY minutes later Gilling stood with Lieutenant-Colonel Church under the gold-mohur trees where battalion headquarters was located. The clump of trees ringed a squat white pagoda which had the appearance of a soiled cake decoration. Crawford, the adjutant, was with them and leaf-splintered sunlight dappled their faces. Beyond the shadows the empty plain burned steadily in the heat.

Church said: 'Brigade's ordered the Gurkhas in. It's no reflection on us. They want the road cleared at the double and we'd have taken too long to reorganize.' He paused, then rested his eyes on Gilling. 'Are you absolutely sure he wasn't dead?'

Gilling nodded. 'I could see him quite clearly, sir. That's why I held my fire.'

They were repeating themselves, but this time Crawford said: 'It would have been better if you hadn't, Tony.'

'What d'you mean?'

'Better for Rance.'

'It would have been murder. If we'd opened up while he was—'

'It couldn't have been worse for him than what's happened.'

Gilling blinked at him, frowning. 'I don't understand.'

Church interposed: 'Sam means that the poor devil has been killed anyway.'

'Killed?'

Church took a deep breath. 'Yes.'

'How d'you know?'

Crawford's voice shook. 'Because they've stuck his head on a bayonet and shoved it on top of the bullock-carts. That's how.'

Horrified, Gilling ejaculated: 'They've *what*?'

'I didn't believe it either,' Crawford said, 'until I went out to the O.P. and saw for myself. The swine have even put a cigarette in his mouth.'

'Oh Christ.' An image formed hideously in Gilling's mind, nauseating him. He said it again, pitched low, drawn out: 'Oh Christ.'

No one spoke for a while. They had been in almost continuous action for over three weeks and the battalion had already suffered upwards of eighty casualties. Death and mutilation were novelties no longer. But there had been nothing like this before; nothing as foul and frightening and inhuman as what had befallen Tim Rance. A miasma of evil seemed to pollute the atmosphere, filtering under the trees from across the plain.

The rumours were true, then. These things happened . . .

Gilling heard himself saying: 'He was alive. I had the glasses on him and saw him struggle when they—'

'You've nothing to blame yourself for.' This was Church, his voice clipped with fatigue.

'I should have done something.' Gilling moved his hands distractedly. 'Something.'

'You couldn't have anticipated this sort of thing.'

'But—'

'None of us could.' Church removed his wide-brimmed hat and mopped his forehead. He looked old suddenly; the face more lined, the wiry hair more grey. 'In any case—'

A distant booming cut him short. The explosions

sounded like the pounding of surf; the small-arms' fire like the snapping of innumerable twigs.

Crawford's eyes blazed. 'That'll be the Gurkhas.'

The three of them hurried to the edge of the trees. The taut line of the horizon was already obscured by dust which rose from a point about a mile away. There was nothing more to be seen, but Gilling's imagination congealed with renewed horror around the sight which awaited the Gurkhas when they moved in close.

Even now his mind could scarcely grasp the reality of it. The insistent sense of personal guilt mingled with the horror as he recalled Nay Dun's harsh, unblinking gaze. And he felt a kind of weakness take root in him, part of which was fear and part a distrust of his own competence to provide leadership in the face of such cold-blooded savagery.

'Brigade, thakin. Brigadier Wemyss.'

'Again?' Church nodded to the stocky signals havildar who had just saluted. 'Very well. I'm coming.'

He turned heavily towards the pagoda. Watching him go, Gilling said: 'Has everyone heard about Rance?' He could think of nothing else.

'It was going the rounds well before you got back. I'd say you were about the last to learn.' Crawford extracted mucus from the corners of his bloodshot eyes, then looked hatefully across the plain. The firing had petered out some minutes ago. 'I hope the Gurkhas gave them hell. I hope they gave the filthy bastards absolute bloody hell.'

There was nothing to keep Gilling at headquarters but he found himself delaying his return to the company. He stayed with Crawford for a while and they lit cigarettes. If Crawford wondered at his continued presence he didn't remark on it, but eventually he

muttered: 'Well, I'd better go and see whether the Old Man wants me.'

He had only taken a few paces when Church reappeared. They waited for him, heeling the cigarettes into the ground.

'The road's open,' Church announced, 'so we can be expecting some transport through—aircraft permitting. It seems the Gurkhas didn't find it all that easy. They've retrieved seven of our wounded, by the way.' As if reading their thoughts, he added meaningly: 'I gather they were well clear of the gully. . . . Do the necessary, will you, Sam? I'm going over to get the Kachins sorted into some kind of shape.'

Crawford nodded. A mule brayed nearby.

'Have you anything for me, sir?'

'Not at the moment, Tony,' Church said. 'You'd best be off.' Then: 'Tony.'

'Sir?'

'As far as I'm concerned, what you did was absolutely right—understand? Remember that. Don't reproach yourself.'

'Thank you, sir.'

Gilling saluted and picked his way through the hotch-potch of headquarters company. The diminutive figure of his Karen orderly, Saw Tun Shwe, ducked under some branches and tailed along at his heels. Men squatted beneath the trees, smoking, oiling their weapons, dozing uncomfortably in their equipment. Others moved purposefully from point to point. Everywhere the broken light was heavy with a brooding tension.

Perry, who commanded the mortar platoon, called to him as he passed and loped across. He was in the middle of a cold shave and his freckled face was badly nicked around the chin. He had joined the battalion within

the last two months and was painfully eager to please.

'Were my fellows all right?'

'Fine, once they got going.'

'They seemed damn slow to me. I was watching from the O.P. and I thought—'

'Then you saw what happened?'

Perry moistened his lips. 'Rance, d'you mean?'

'Yes.'

'Yes, I saw it—and I wish to God I hadn't. With the cigarette it looked like something at a fairground. Three shies a penny—you know?' The line of his mouth slackened in a queer way. 'Christ, Tony, what sort of war *is* this?'

Gilling shrugged, tongue-tied, and walked on. The sun hit him as he left the trees and he winced as the instantaneous spurt of sweat stung the prickly-heat across his shoulder-blades. He walked leadenly, beset by the lingering sense of failure, haunted by the bestiality that morning had let loose.

The company's shallow weapon-pits straddled the road like the results of a bombing. As he drew closer he recognized the compact figure of Nay Dun and at once he was uneasy. So long as he had remained under the trees he had been able to delude himself that the sense of nightmare would pass. He had been able to gain something from Church's weary strength and Crawford's bitterness. Even Perry's nervousness had tended to buttress his shaken morale. But here, out on the empty plain, alone with the Karens under the hard sun, there would be no one to protect him from himself. And he knew that all Nay Dun would offer was a watchful, alien impassivity that would be like a mirror in which he would see the secret things he already feared might possess and destroy him if he failed to keep them under control.

CHAPTER THREE

He had been less than three years in Burma. As recently as eighteen months ago he was still with the Colonial and Overseas Bank in Rangoon, and it was only a year since he was commissioned in the 2nd Frontier Rifles. He and Glazebrook were the first non-regular officers to be posted to the battalion, and though they had been received with a certain patronage, the initial coolness in the mess had quickly thawed. Other erstwhile civilians had subsequently joined the unit and they, too, had added their leaven, gaining the respect and confidence of even the most hidebound professional.

But nothing had changed between him and Nay Dun. The subedar's attitude was the same now as when Gilling first took over the company. Rigidly correct, it lacked all warmth and never for one moment had Gilling been made to feel that he wasn't on trial.

He had written home about him soon after coming to the battalion. In a letter to his father he had said: *My second-in-command's a Governor's commissioned officer with the rank of subedar. I'd say he was about forty, though it's often difficult to assess a hillman's age. But he's already clocked over twenty years' service and his row of medal ribbons is a good five inches wide. Makes me feel* very *naked! I reckon he's forgotten more about the game than I'll ever know and I can feel him watching me sometimes, almost as if he's waiting for me to slip up. He's as inscrutable as the Sphinx, though, and never says much, one way or the other. And yet, curiously, he's a tower of strength.*

Given time, I suppose I'll find out what goes on behind the mask, but so far I feel that I'm cheek-by-jowl with a stranger. . . .

They were in barracks then—the mornings spent on the scorched clay parade-grounds; the afternoons in the wooded practice areas near by. In those days they were playing at soldiers; going through the motions. The nearest fighting was a whole continent away and to be in uniform was merely a sop to one's conscience. Sometimes the conversation in the mess meandered around the possibility of the battalion being sent overseas—to North Africa, perhaps, or to Abyssinia. A recurring sense of guilt fostered the hope, but there was slight chance of its fulfilment and everyone knew it. Meanwhile they endured the frustration of regimental duties and the monotony of endless training routines.

Every week-day morning, at seven precisely, an immaculate Nay Dun would have the Karens drawn up on the company parade ground for Gilling's inspection, and at four-thirty every afternoon they would be dismissed. It was like working to somewhat rearranged banking hours. More often than not the evenings were free and by six, bathed and changed into freshly-laundered khaki, Gilling would be driving down to Mandalay for dinner or on his way to the club or walking over to one of the married officers' bungalows outside the battalion lines. There was always somewhere to go; something to do. And no matter how strongly the subedar's critical vigilance had weighed on him during the day he could invariably shrug it off with the first whisky-soda.

During those first few months he had no difficulty in keeping Nay Dun's attitude in perspective. But later, when the unit was alerted and they were moved

south-east into the mountainous wilderness along the Siamese border, it became less easy. The barrack-square had trapped him into little more than errors of parade-ground procedure. But the jungle was a chaotic new world and his lack of experience put him at a disadvantage with even the rawest Karen recruit.

Even so, he could still joke about it. In another letter to his father he had written: *Nay Dun really relegated me to my proper place the other day. We were out on an independent training exercise when one of my riflemen was bitten by a snake—just above the ankle. I suppose I was on the spot within half a minute of the first shout, but for the life of me I couldn't think what to do. It's not the sort of thing they teach you about in a bank or at OCTU! Obviously, though, it was imperative to stop the poison from spreading—and quickly. A tourniquet seemed the most sensible first step. I was just starting to do something about it when —presto!—Nay Dun arrived and virtually barged me aside. In no time at all he'd produced a razor-blade and made two deep cuts through the punctures. Then he started sucking—and spitting—for all he was worth. After that he lit a cigarette and held the end for a good ten seconds against the wound. The rifleman moaned his head off—and I don't blame him—but Nay Dun's promptness probably saved his life. Naturally, I felt pretty foolish about the whole thing:* de trop, *to say the least. When it was all over Nay Dun gave me one of his special indecipherable looks, but I could imagine damn well what he was thinking. . . .*

It took time for his urban mind to adjust itself to the conditions. His judgement was often at fault and he frequently felt the need for guidance; the reassurance of another opinion. But the subedar's demeanour consistently discouraged inquiry and prevented the

development of any real understanding between them. The flaw in their relationship wasn't something he could bring himself to discuss with his fellow officers. Put into words it would have sounded ridiculous and petty. It was intensely personal, deep, subtle— and as insistent as water on stone. It wasn't that he was oversensitive to criticism or advice. Indeed, he would have welcomed either. What confused and disturbed him was the enigmatic expression that greeted his orders and decisions. More and more it seemed to him that he was being put to the test and the belief wormed its way into his confidence. Time and again he had the suspicion that Nay Dun read him like a book—every doubt, every hesitancy—and he felt himself gradually being stripped mentally bare by his subordinate's implacable gaze.

Once, while on a long-range company patrol, he found himself completely lost. For a whole afternoon he fought against admitting it, hoping desperately that the map would at last come to his rescue and begin to make sense. Several times he argued that there was nothing to be ashamed of in consulting with Nay Dun, yet pride prevented him from doing so. He got himself orientated eventually, but the maddening thing was that he felt quite certain the subedar had been aware of their position throughout and deliberately remained silent.

There was no longer an opportunity to escape for a few hours and dine or go dancing or get in a round of golf or sit at the Long Bar with some friends. All that was over. They were still without an enemy; still concerned with make-believe. But they were training the hard way, two hundred miles from railhead and the nearest town, deep in a green, crumpled, cavernous no-man's-land that was totally foreign to anything

he and most of the British officers had ever experienced.

Never for one moment was Nay Dun anything but impeccably efficient. His own platoon was the smartest; the hardest driven. His authority was immense and his standard of discipline the most exacting. His whole bearing carried the stamp of an imported military tradition, but he belonged to the jungle. It was his home, the Karens' home, and for them the wilderness was signposted as surely as any city street. The only novice, Gilling told himself ruefully, the only blundering outsider in the whole company, was the man in command.

He ate berries once—red, plum-sized things which tempted him as he sweated along a narrow track. Within minutes his throat dried and his tongue seemed to shrivel up. For half an hour he suffered an intense pain. Anxious to warn others he spoke to Nay Dun, telling him to pass the word throughout the company that the berries were poisonous.

'They know already, thakin.' It was said without scorn, but the lack of the slightest trace of emotion in the voice seemed to make the comment all the more pointed. 'They have known since they were children.'

There were other incidents; miscalculations, errors of commission and omission, small stupidities. And each one undermined a fraction more Gilling's already precarious self-assurance. In the subedar's presence he became increasingly withdrawn. To all intents and purposes they worked well together, but inwardly he was on his guard, mindful of his inadequacies and resolved to expose them as little as possible. In moments of depression he came to believe that Nay Dun's manner—for all its punctiliousness—was riddled with a mocking contempt. And even at the best of times

he was never able to shake off the suspicion that he was under constant surveillance; that little enough of himself remained for Nay Dun to uncover.

The months passed. The war widened its horizons and found them an enemy. The battalion moved down to the plain where the roads were choked with refugees and where great pillars of black smoke rose along the skyline. Reality replaced the make-believe. Glazebrook was blown to bits at Pegu: Mackenzie died of wounds after a patrol-clash. Every company suffered its share of casualties. Shock and fatigue calloused the spirit; blunted the imagination.

And now, within the last hour, the reality had been touched by nightmare. Something monstrous and unnerving had shown itself, and as he walked towards the spot where Nay Dun waited Gilling wondered how long it would be before the subedar recognized that he was afraid.

CHAPTER FOUR

They lay in their weapon-pits all day and there wasn't a cloud to shield them from the sun. At noon the first squadrons of Japanese bombers went over and they stared up at them hopelessly and watched them go. The tripod-mounted Brens were as useless as toys. Later they watched them returning south—high, unmolested, the formations unbroken. It seemed as if the sky was theirs already, to come and go as they pleased.

Trucks shuttled warily along the road and a few jeeps raced back and forth. Mirages shimmered on the worn macadam and heat blurred the claret hills rimming the eastern limits of the plain. On the plain itself there were occasional clumps of palms which stood like tiny islands surrounded by a vast motionless ocean where flocks of white egrets gathered as if they were sea-birds.

Another glinting wedge of bombers roared north in mid-afternoon and Gilling despaired as he looked at them. The plain was as impossible to defend as the sky. He gazed about him at the immense spread of the land and asked himself how long the division could possibly expect to hold the Japanese in check. The forward brigades were already covering impracticably wide frontages. Even so there were miles of level plain to either side of them where the enemy could roam almost at will, and it was surely only a matter of time before something more powerful than a small, expendable force was moved round behind them during the night.

They had been outnumbered and out-manoeuvred

from the start, and now that Rangoon had fallen the pressure on them was irresistibly gathering momentum. The next attack would be more violent than the last; the one after that more violent still. Each would cripple them further and there were no reserves to fill the gaps. Meanwhile their rear bases and lines of communication were being systematically destroyed from the air. It was demoralizing to picture the wooden towns already gutted or freshly spurting flame, the broken bridges, the railway yards in ruins. But all they could do was watch the bombers' triumphant passage across the sky and wait for another ground assault to come in.

He thought of Burma suddenly as an enormous culde-sac; a huge horse-shoe trap. The morning's fear had not gone out of him and now it was shot through with a premonition of doom. Whether Church and Crawford and the others were privately of the same mind, or whether they still clung to the hems of hope, he did not know. But, strangely, he was always aware of a sense of security whilst in their presence. The herd instinct was at work in him, the desire to be with his own kind, and more than once during the day he looked towards the pagoda and toyed with the notion of returning to headquarters on some pretext or other in order to spend a few minutes speaking his own language; shaking off the feeling of personal isolation.

He moved restlessly around the company's positions, going from platoon to platoon. and Saw Tun Shwe accompanied him like a second shadow. Once, in late afternoon, an outlying section reported movement on their right flank which turned out to be a mounted patrol of Punjabis. Shortly afterwards firing started up in one of the brigade areas directly to the south of them, but it soon died away. False alarms were nothing

new. The burning silence settled over them again and the plain reverted to its primeval emptiness.

About an hour before sundown Abbott unexpectedly came across the paddy stubble from the direction of headquarters. He was a regular, in command of the battalion's other Karen company.

'Hallo, stranger.' It was a tonic to hear his deep, languid drawl again. 'How's it going?'

'So-so.' Gilling shrugged. 'You're way off your beat, aren't you?'

'Playing truant for five minutes. The Old Man wanted me, but I was damned if I was going back to my own little hole in the ground without seeing how the other half lived.'

Gilling marvelled that anyone could still raise a smile; still—despite the sweat and grime—somehow manage to appear relaxed and unruffled.

Abbott went on: 'You had a bitch of a morning, Tony.'

'I've been hating myself ever since.'

'Nonsense. That's not what I meant.' He brushed his sandy moustache. 'How've your chaps taken it?'

'They never beat drums, as you know.'

'What about the redoubtable Nay Dun?'

'Saw Tun Shwe's the only one to have made any direct comment.'

'Which was?'

'That the Japs are a lot of savages—words to that effect.'

Abbott nodded, glancing round at the occupants of the nearest weapon-pits. 'I'd call that merely a starting-point.' His eyes hardened momentarily. Rance had been a particular friend of his. With quiet vehemence, he said: 'I'll never forgive them. Never in a hundred bloody years.'

Neither spoke for a while. Then Abbott continued: 'I've promised my fellows bonus-money.' He raised his face to the sky as though he were suffocating. 'Five rupees for every proved corpse and fifty for a prisoner.'

'Does the Old Man approve?'

'Haven't told him about it. It's a private arrangement.' He shook his head. 'Abbott's privy purse. If I'm broke within the week I couldn't be better pleased.'

'You won't be.' The remark slipped out.

'Broke?' Abbott gave him a searching glance. His lips slowly curled. 'Defeatist talk, Tony?'

'I've got a touch of the shakes today.'

'I think most of us have, one way or another.'

Gilling nodded towards the horizon, his despair surfacing. 'I ask you, Mike, what chance have we got? They'll have a ring round us before very much longer. It stands to reason.' Abbott was suddenly a safety-valve for his day-long uneasiness. 'Their aircraft have ignored us for over twenty-four hours, but that's not out of brotherly love. I've got the feeling they're just finishing off some loose ends up north before really starting to tie us up in one big bundle.'

Abbott lifted his heavy shoulders; let them drop. 'God knows.' There was another pause. Then, with a deliberate change of tone, the drawl emphasized, he smiled and said: 'All I can say is this is a perfectly lousy way of earning a living.'

Their eyes met; held one another. Chastened, Gilling said: 'I'm sorry, Mike.'

'I've had the blues myself, don't worry. It's an occupational disease. All this bloody hanging about does it—all this Micawber business.' He adjusted his chin-strap. 'Well,' he said presently, 'this won't set the Thames on fire. I'd better be pushing along. 'Bye, Tony.'

''Bye, Mike. See you soon.'

'You bet.'

Gilling watched him go. To unburden himself a little had been like a letting of blood. It was keeping his weaknesses battened down that allowed them to breed and multiply. Yet, as far as Nay Dun was concerned, he had no choice but to continue to hide them away. To know despair, to experience the first cold fingerings of fear—these were self-destructive enough. But for the subedar to observe them at work in him would be a devastating ignominy. Abbott had recognized the symptoms but there had been understanding in his oblique reproof; encouragement. But neither was to be found in Nay Dun's mask-like expression. All it ever implied was: A British officer is someone who leads and sets an example. A British officer should be like Colonel Church, like Captain Crawford, like Captain Abbott. . . .

Gilling remained rooted to the spot where Abbott had left him, watching the burly figure recede—grateful to him; envious of him.

The sun fell away westwards towards a cushion of waiting clouds. The company ate a scratchy meal, carried in mess-tins from the slight depression in the rear where there was a spring sufficient to provide for their needs. Gilling ate with them—washing down the rice and stringy meat with a can of heavily-sweetened tea. The mules were quartered in the depression and now, as the light softened and relative coolness came, they grew restless with relief.

The plain began to shrink as the swift dusk set in. The company stood-to and Gilling went the rounds with the platoon and section commanders, co-ordinating the Brens' fixed lanes of fire, checking the

night's duty rosters, spreading the password. Though they were in reserve the atmosphere was expectantly tense. Dusk was always a bad time, a dangerous time, prompting the imagination, plucking at the nerves. Only the mules thought otherwise, answering one another boldly as the eerie silence intensified.

A few isolated stars began to gleam. Soon after seven a runner summoned Gilling to headquarters and he left Nay Dun in charge during his absence. After the open it seemed as black as pitch under the trees, but the dim glow of a shielded hurricane-lamp guided him through to the pagoda. Major Gray, the second-in-command, greeted him as he entered the compact aura of light.

'Ah, Tony.' He looked desperately tired. 'The C.O.'s at Brigade and I've just had word that we're to patrol the road north of here in strength throughout the night in an effort to put a stop to these blocks being set up.'

'I see, sir.'

'Mike Abbott's company is taking the first stint—until O-two hundred hours. Then he hands over to Richardson, who'll continue until first light. Is that clear?'

Gilling nodded.

'Make sure your chaps know about it. You're astride the road and we don't want any mix-ups.'

'Very good, sir. Is that all?'

'Yes.' Gray ran both hands over the freckled, bird's-egg dome of his head. 'Except that Abbott will be moving off in about a quarter of an hour's time.'

Gilling saluted and turned about. He picked his way through a litter of huddled forms and emerged into the indeterminate starlight. Gray had been almost curt in his weariness and no one else had been present, yet

he was as loath to leave and return to the battalion's perimeter as before. The nagging feeling of solitude increased the further he left the pagoda behind. Try as he might he could not shake it off and he found himself wishing the night away with every step that he took; praying that tomorrow's dawn would not be like the last.

All men were shadows now and Nay Dun had been neutralized along with the rest. But there was no escape from himself, and what he had despised and vainly grappled with since morning thrived now that darkness had come.

CHAPTER FIVE

A PALE slice of moon drifted into the sky soon after ten, helping the stars to silver the plain. In their scattered weapon-pits the men slept in rotation, a couple of hours at a stretch. It was easy to sleep. For days past there had been little enough of it, and now it took them the moment they were relieved, sometimes before they even changed position, so that many remained sprawled beside their weapons, cheeks nestling their rifle-butts, closed eyes apparently sighted along the barrels of their automatics.

Gilling followed the normal practice of sharing the duty watch with his platoon commanders and senior N.C.O.s. He slept until midnight, when a havildar woke him, and the firm touch on his arm brought him suddenly to consciousness. Heavy-eyed, he clipped his webbing together and rose stiffly to his feet. The plain was beautiful in the starlight, though not for him. Far off, a jackal cried and the sound was lonely, weird, setting his nerves immediately on edge.

'Anything to report?' His voice was thick.

'Nothing, thakin.'

The havildar limped away to his platoon and Gilling started on his round. The jackal cried again, hinting at stealth and evil. He crossed to the road and toured the sections which faced north. There was no sign of Abbott's patrols but it was a comfort to know that they were somewhere beyond the thin strands of low wire. A rifleman he spoke to reported having seen one of them during the last hour.

Silence lay over the plain like a dead thing and

nothing moved under the glittering pulse of the sky. Gilling circled the weapon-pits to the east and west of the road, peering into the vague distances; straining his ears for something other than a jackal's cry and the slow rasp of his own boots in the stubble. It was almost impossible not to suspect that beyond the limits of his vision, the night was alive with Japanese.

Near by, a Karen stifled a cough; another shifted the cramped angle of his legs. With some of them Gilling enchanged whispered question and answer; with some merely a nod. He knew them all by name; their individual qualities and defects. But he had no idea of what went on in the private recesses of their minds and he wondered now to what extent their imaginations made them suffer; whether they, too, endured a continuing sense of horror and apprehension. Even the slowest-witted couldn't have failed to appreciate that the odds were already overwhelmingly weighted against them. And surely the manner of Rance's death hadn't left them absolutely unmoved? True, only a generation or two separated them from the old tribal barbarities, and in moments of stress the imposed veneer sometimes wore very thin. Yet, even so, he had expected more than one brief, dismissive comment about Rance and had thought that nightfall would perhaps bring them to a pitch of overt nervousness. But there had been no apparent change in them. They remained as stolid as before—a day older, only; a day wearier. In his heart he knew that he couldn't have hoped for better troops to command, but he also knew that only by an immense effort of will would he ever match their almost bovine calm. And he found himself wishing that their disciplined façade would show some signs of frailty which might help him towards recovery of his own dwindling self-respect.

He paused beside the road before resuming his cautious tour, pushing the insistent vision of Rance from his mind's-eye. He tried to think of anything except the recent past and the immediate future. With a kind of desperation he told himself that others in the battalion were under greater mental pressure. Church and Grey were married and neither knew for sure whether their wives had been safely evacuated. Crawford's brother was believed killed in Malaya. Many of the Karen's villages were in enemy hands. . . . But the reflection did him no good, for he argued that it was an advantage for anxiety and distress to involve a man beyond the limits of the wire which hemmed him in. Anger was needed—a slow-burning hatred—and anxiety over what had happened elsewhere, to one's own flesh and blood, helped grind it into the spirit. He lacked this additional source of strength. Burma's towns and villages made no nostalgic claim on him. There was no wife; no brother. His only near relative was his father, and Sussex was as remote as Timbuktu. He was involved only to the extent that he was personally inside the wire and there was nothing except his own resolve with which to surmount the dread and despair that had lodged themselves in him. He lacked even Abbott's quiet vindictive rage at the loss of a close friend. All he felt was an appalled dismay; a fearful sickness which was stripping him of his armour.

He thought of Abbott for a while, knowing better why he envied him, then continued his circling vigil. Time passed, marked by the moon's climb and the slow tilt of the constellations. The silence held, but his nerves remained as taut as a wound spring. The lull wouldn't last for ever. The Japanese would strike when they were ready—choosing the moment, the

place. The initiative was theirs and his only surprise was that their next move was being so long delayed.

An owl flew over and it was quiet enough for Gilling to hear the soft beat of its wings. He checked with his watch and found that his stint was almost finished. Nay Dun was next on duty and he walked carefully across to the subedar's platoon area. For a long moment, before bending down, he studied the chunky frame of his deputy. As if for the first time he noted the square jaw, the squashed nose, the hairless skin, the close-cropped skull, the bare, tattooed knees, the muscular calves. Even in sleep the man looked a soldier, a professional, and his expression was as alien and enigmatic as ever.

He woke before Gilling's hand touched his arm. 'Thakin?'

'Two o'clock, subedar. O-two hundred.'

The instinctive tension left Nay Dun's body. He rose, unblinking, and knocked the crown of his hat into shape before putting it on. Standing, he came up to Gilling's shoulder.

Gilling said: 'Everything's quiet. There hasn't been a sound.'

They were close to the road, within a few paces of the advanced weapon-pits. No sooner were the words out of his mouth than the nearest rifleman grunted and turned his head warningly in their direction. Looking beyond him, Gilling saw the ghostly shapes of moving men. The sight caught him unawares. They were less than a hundred yards away, close-grouped, coming towards them. Alarm gripped him. He threw himself down, dragging at his whistle-cord. An infinitesimal instant later he realized his mistake, but it was too late to disguise his action. He was already on hands and knees, crouching at Nay Dun's feet. A cold feeling

swept through him, followed by a burning sense of embarrassment. Time seemed to run to a halt. He knew exactly what the subedar was going to say, but waiting for it to be said was a long-drawn agony of shame.

'It is Captain Abbott's company, thakin—Captain Abbott's company coming back.'

In the darkness Gilling reviled himself.

He managed one hour's fitful sleep before the firing started. It came from the south, in snatches, like hail driving against glass. For a few seconds there was nothing to be seen. In the initial bewilderment of sudden wakefulness it was impossible to tell how close it was; where exactly the attack was developing. Then the first star-shells burst in the distance and floated like tiny acetylene lamps above the forward brigades.

The Karens squirmed into position and waited for the attack to spread. They lay like fallen statues, peering rigidly into the night. For twenty minutes the firing continued spasmodically, then petered out. A solitary flare lifted and died as silence once more flooded back over the land. But it was impossible to relax. There was no telling when or where the assault might be renewed and the men remained watchfully at their posts, all chance of further sleep destroyed. A couple of ambulances lumbered through the battalion's lines soon after four, and when they returned the shadowless light of dawn was slowly beginning to take hold.

Gilling watched it strengthen with relief. They had been reprieved again—for the time being. He lit a cigarette and stood up, flexing the ache from his legs. The sun's rim was inching out of the eastern hills and he could see Richardson's company moving wearily in

column of march along the road, their patrol over. He needed no reminder of the incident with Nay Dun, but his face flushed as the memory renewed its taunt. The subedar had said nothing more while they stayed together and Gilling had deliberately avoided his gaze. But he knew. He wasn't blind. He knew, all right. Already. . . . And from now on his endless scrutiny would be more intense, more humiliating, than ever before.

CHAPTER SIX

The mules were watered and fed. The men ate; sipped their sickly-sweet tea. Saw Tun Shwe lugged a canvas bucket from the spring and Gilling squatted by the roadside, scraping a two-day growth of beard from his face. The plain seemed to expand as the sun climbed, dwarfing the division's territory into insignificance. Dotted about the paddy fields beyond the pagoda he could see the mole-like spoil of Abbott's weapon-pits, and in the gold-mohur trees around the pagoda itself there were occasional signs of movement. A convoy of heavy trucks, look-outs perched fore and aft, ground past from the north, spraying dust as they went. Otherwise, his own company apart, the plain and the road appeared to be utterly deserted.

The feeling of isolation became overpowering and as soon as he had finished shaving Gilling made his way to headquarters. The first person he met was Lloyd, the signals officer.

'Hallo, *mon brave*.' It was Lloyd's stock greeting, but this morning it jarred. 'Want a mug of tea?'

'I've had some, thanks.'

'Rum do last night, wasn't it? Cat and mouse stuff, I suppose. Practice makes perfect.'

'It seems like it.'

Lloyd's eyes twitched behind his spectacles. 'You'll be glad to hear that according to the B.B.C. Overseas Service we're in the process of stabilizing the front.'

'*We* are?'

'Patrol activity, casualties inflicted, attacks beaten off.' He snorted. 'They sounded bag-full of confidence.'

'Christ,' Gilling said.

He walked on as far as the pagoda. Crawford and Gray were there, bending over a map spread out on the white-washed base.

Crawford looked up. 'I was just about to have you hauled in, Tony.'

'Oh?'

'The C.O. wants you.'

'What for, d'you know?'

'I'd better not jump the gun, if you don't mind. But the guts of it is that we're pulling back.'

'The division?'

'The whole shooting match.'

'When?'

'Starting at dusk.'

Gray said: 'Not before time, either, in my view. I thought we were in for it last night, quite honestly, but maybe they aren't ready for us yet. With any luck they'll kick themselves tomorrow.'

Some green parakeets twittered among the trees' scarlet blossoms. There was the smell of wood smoke; of sweat and dust.

'The Old Man won't be long,' Crawford said.

Gilling nodded and leaned against the pagoda. Twenty-four hours had passed since Rance was killed and they had seemed unending, playing in deadly fashion on his nerves. He knew that the longer the division remained static the more his fears would betray him; drain him of all ability. Crawford's news meant an escape from a locality he had come to loathe, and the prospect of being mobile again eased the trapped feeling that had begun to obsess him. Stubbornly, his mind refused to carry him beyond the immediate sense of deliverance. Another withdrawal wouldn't put paid to the hostile drone of aircraft or negative the build-up of the opposing ground forces.

The inevitable was merely delayed; no more than that. The dry paddy fields were everywhere the same—empty and flat and indefensible. Yet, illogically, hope flickered.

He unbuttoned the map-case from his hip and glanced over the printed plain to the north of their position. Where? he thought. He was on the point of asking Crawford when he heard Church's voice.

'Has Gilling been sent for?'

'He's here, sir,' Crawford said.

Gilling stood up; brought his heels together. He hadn't noticed Church arrive. Nor, until now, had he asked himself why it was that he had been specially singled out. But there was something in the C.O.'s tone, a brisk urgency, that caused him a momentary disquiet.

'Ah, there you are!' Church exclaimed, turning.

'Sir?'

'I've got a job for you, Tony. Come over to the table so that I can put you properly in the picture.'

'I'll make a start, Charles,' Gray interjected, 'while the going's good. D'you mind if I take your jeep? It's the only thing for an off-the-road recce.'

'Righto.'

Gray left, determination in his short stride. There was a rickety bamboo table under the nearest tree and Church led Gilling to it. Crawford went with them.

'Did Sam tell you anything?'

'Only that the division's pulling out.'

'I see.' Church dropped his hat on to the table and unfolded his own map, ironing the creases down. He paused before going on, marshalling his facts. Then he said: 'We're making a tactical withdrawal of about forty miles, starting tonight and completing the move four nights from now. That'll bring us to this area'—

he pointed a tobacco-stained finger—'where the plain narrows to about half its present width. Division's intention is to dig its toes in there until such time as the Chinese are firmly in position behind us.'

'The Chinese?'

'Three of their divisions are on their way in from the north—have been for some days.' Church's smile printed crow's-feet into the corners of his eyes. 'How's that for good news?'

'It couldn't be better.'

Gilling's spirits lifted. More than once there had been speculation about the possibility of Chinese troops reinforcing the front, but even the most incorrigible optimist in the battalion had ceased to believe it would ever happen. Only a week ago Church had poured cold water on a report that they were already moving in by insisting that Brigade knew nothing of it. 'In any case,' he'd said, 'I'm too old a soldier to take as gospel everything I hear.'

And now he was saying: 'It'll help to level things up a bit, certainly. It's no secret any more—least of all to the Jap. That's why he's switched his air attack these past few days. . . . However, I'm digressing. Let's go back to the beginning.' His fingers went into action again. 'We're here—right? Over a period of four nights we'll leap-frog back to here—to Gyobin. Is that understood?'

'Yes, sir.'

Some of the accumulated despair seemed to sweat itself out of Gilling as he stared at the map. There was cause for hope, then; some sort of chance. . . . But he still couldn't rid himself of the vague sense of disquiet. Why this informal briefing—in advance of everyone else? What sort of task had Church in mind?

'By dawn tomorrow,' Church went on, 'the division

will be in position astride this river bed—the Nga Chaung, just north of the Bandaung road-junction. Gray's off there now for a look-see.'

The road ran through the centre of the plain, as straight as a ruled line. For a hundred miles or more there wasn't a kink in it. The only branch thrown off was the one leading to Bandaung, and this was merely a loop, rejoining the main stem some thirty miles further on. It looked rather like the bow of an elongated D.

'Just north of the Bandaung road-junction,' Church repeated significantly. 'Seventy-two hours later we'll be concentrated in the Gyobin area—which is a similar distance north of where the Bandaung road runs back into the main L of C. From this time tomorrow the southern end of the Bandaung road is going to be open to the enemy. It's absolutely vital, therefore, that we stop him from putting in a fast right hook that'll bring him to Gyobin before we get there ourselves.'

Gilling could guess what was coming and his heart sank.

"It'll be your job to see that he doesn't.'

Gilling heard himself say: 'I understand.'

Church looked at him levelly. 'To be honest, Tony, I'd have said it called for at least two companies. But Division won't wear it. They don't want to dissipate their strength more than the absolute minimum. The elastic's at full stretch already, as you know. The road's prepared for demolition and they consider the country's rugged enough for a small force to do what's necessary.' He waited a moment. 'You've knowledge of the road, haven't you? I seem to remember your telling me —'

'I've driven along it.' It was a reluctant admission. 'I spent a leave at Bandaung once.'

'That's what I thought.' Church drew a slip of paper from the pocket of his map-case. 'Here's the demolition plan—a bridge at the eleventh mile; the road mined at two other places. That'll stop them using transport, though I dare say they'll have a stab at pushing some through to start with.'

Gilling's mind was in a whirl. 'Do I get any mortars?' He spoke in uncertainty. 'Extra Brens?'

'I can't spare them, Tony. What with you gone and Rance's Kachins down to half strength we'll need everything we've got ourselves. We're on a shoe-string as it is. I'm sorry.'

'I see.' He bit his lower lip, trying to instil some sense into his thinking. 'When do I start?'

'That's up to you. But if I were in your place I'd get moving just as soon as I'd drawn supplies. You'll want to get established behind that bridge before dark, and even cross-country it's all of twenty miles.'

'No transport, sir? Not even to the junction?'

'Sorry again. You're in for a long trek, I'm afraid.' Church's eyes crinkled sympathetically. 'Assuming you choose to go to ground at the bridge it'll mean that you'll be roughly on a line with us at first light tomorrow. Thereafter you must phase your withdrawal as best you can, remembering, of course, that we'll be pulling back in nightly stages of about ten miles.'

'And I rejoin the battalion at Gyobin on the fourth morning?'

'That's it. The all-important thing is to deny the Japs free use of the road until it doesn't matter any more. You'll be the best judge of ways and means—that's why I'm not giving you any detailed orders. It'll be your show entirely.'

Gilling took a long look at the map on the table; pulled out his own and marked the covering talc with

a few swift pencil-strokes. Bandaung was about halfway along the bow of the D. Once the northward curve was made the two roads were roughly parallel with one another and some twelve miles apart. In between were low hills, scrub and the beginnings of jungle. Bandaung itself was over a thousand feet above the plain—fourteen hundred, the map said—and for a second or two his memory offered a view of it, like a coloured postcard, for inspection. He pictured the road, too—unmetalled, twisting, irregular—and recalled how sequestered it was; how much a world apart.

Church stroked his wiry hair. 'Any points you want to raise, Tony?'

'I've got a couple of doubtful starters—one with a badly blistered foot and another with a septic arm. Both riflemen.'

'Count them out. You don't want passengers. Anything else?'

'I can't think of anything at the moment.'

'Very well. I'll come over and see you before you shove off. When d'you think that'll be. An hour?'

'An hour should do it, sir.' He saw from his watch that it was ten past nine.

'Righto.'

'All the best, Tony,' Crawford said. 'Give 'em hell.'

'Thanks.'

Gilling saluted, dejection spreading through him as he turned and walked away. There had scarcely been time for him to grasp the true extent of his responsibility. But from the moment he guessed where Church's disclosures were leading, one thought had been uppermost in his mind; one person.

He was going back into the jungle with Nay Dun.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE day's first phalanx of bombers thundered across the sky soon after ten, almost drowning their voices.

'All set?'

'Just about, sir.'

Church squinted skywards. 'That's where they score. They can do what they damn well like from up there.' Exposed to the sun, his cheeks were sunken; his eyes raw-rimmed. For some reason Gilling suspected that he was thinking about his wife and the evacuation centres in the far north. 'If only we could match them in the air I'd still say that we could lick them.' He looked old again; old yet defiant.

Gilling waited until the packed formations had gone clear before ordering the men to leave their weapon-pits. The platoons grouped loosely together and the six mules, already loaded up, were led at the trot from the depression.

Church watched approvingly. 'I'm bringing one of Abbott's platoons over to do something about filling the gap you're going to leave.' He gave the plain a glance and shrugged. 'All I ask is that the little bastards ignore us for one more day.'

Nay Dun joined them; threw up a tattooed arm. 'Ready to move, thakin.' He might have been on a parade ground.'

'Thank you, subedar.'

Church said: 'Well, I won't keep you. Good luck.'

'And to you, sir.'

'Pay my respects to Bandaung. Betty and I spent our honeymoon there years ago and I've always had a soft spot for it.' The strong lines of Church's face weaken-

ed momentarily, revealing a glimpse of bewilderment; of bitter hurt. He hesitated. Then, as if feeling the need for self-discipline, he gave a quick, dismissive nod. 'See you in four days' time.'

They headed across the paddy fields, bodies bent under the weight of weapons and equipment, uniforms rapidly darkening with sweat. The only sound was the breaking of stubble and the jingle of the mules' harnesses. They moved in double file, spread out as if separated by a broad track. Nay Dun's platoon showed the way and the others followed at twenty yard intervals. Three of the mules carried the platoon Brens and reserve ammunition; the rest, led by the company cooks, bore a knee-buckling load of rations for seventy-eight men.

The battalion's positions vanished into the plain. The pagoda receded and the trees which ringed it round became one more small island in a vast, motionless brown sea. They marched for an hour before halting for ten minutes, and a second wave of bombers passed high overhead while they rested. An hour later they rested again, smoking, sipping the tepid water in their bottles. In the brassy dome of the sky the blurred disc of the sun burned almost white, hammering out slow, silent waves of heat. A village showed up in the distance to the north of them, together with another pagoda. A flock of egrets scattered, clapping away in alarm. But for the most part they seemed to have the plain to themselves and there was something uncanny about its continued emptiness. The hills gradually came nearer, sage-green and crumpled, and the paddy fields showed signs of ending. There were stretches of parched grass and clumps of bamboo; the bed of a dried stream littered with bleached driftwood, with mango trees along its sandy bank.

Gilling was counting on reaching the Bandaung road by three o'clock. It ran due east across the plain and they were approaching it diagonally from the south-west. At each of the hourly halts he pored over his map, familiarizing himself with the road's behaviour after it entered the hills. It was too much to expect the Japanese to pass it by altogether. But, deep down, he fathered the hope that they would merely probe as far as the bridge. Once they found this was blown and realized that a swift, motorized thrust was impossible, there was a chance of their deciding not to press through to Bandaung and beyond—or so he told himself. He had no illusions about the way his mind worked. Since Rance's death he had presented a false face to the world. Pride controlled him, forcing him to act, making him do what was expected of him. But fear had hollowed him out. Four days on his own were going to seem a life-time and he wasn't sure how far he could trust himself again. Anything could happen, and with all his heart he asked that the oncoming tide would do no more than lap against them until the company rejoined the battalion at Gyobin.

Nay Dun had shown no reaction to the news about the Chinese. Nor had he so much as flickered an eyelid when told of their flank-guard role. As always his face had remained set, as if muscle-bound, and Gilling had noticed neither relief nor apprehension amongst the Karens as a whole. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, pain—these things they admitted. Below the surface they remained strangers; unfathomable—none more so than his second-in-command. It was a time for comradeship and close understanding, but the only secret Gilling shared with him was one which no man would willingly share with another.

They heard the fighter-bomber coming, but no one saw it until it was almost too late. One moment it was a drone in the sky; the next it was bearing down on them, snarling out of the sun in a steep dive.

The shrill blasts of Gilling's whistle were lost in the aircraft's screaming crescendo. There was no cover; nowhere to hide. The company scattered, running in all directions. The mules reared, restrained by frantic, stumbling men. A shadow flicked hugely across the ground as Gilling went prone. Looking up he was in time to see the bombs on their way down. He bared his teeth, cringing. A split second later, at two separate points some fifty yards apart, spreading fans of earth erupted with a violent, concussive roar. The ground lurched under him and he felt as though he had been kicked in the stomach.

The aircraft levelled off, banking at about two hundred feet, turning to make another run. The air was full of drifting dust and there was a high-pitched ringing in Gilling's ears.

'Open up when it comes back!'

He barely heard his own voice. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw one of the cooks being dragged by a terrified mule. The red circle on the aircraft's wings were clearly visible as it banked. He recognized the snub-nosed silhouette. It was a Zero, and he knew from past experience that there would be no more bombs.

'Aim off!' he was shouting. 'Remember to aim off!'

All they could do was use their rifles and light automatics. There wasn't time to set up the Brens. The aircraft was head-on now, pointing their way. For a few moments it seemed immobile, pinned to the sky.

Then, swiftly, it began to grow in size and the din of its engine swelled, becoming fierce, demented. Dashes of flame winked at them from the leading edges of the

wings and small fountains of soil sprinted darkly along the ground.

'Now!' Gilling bawled. 'Now!'

The Zero swept over them, blinking the sun. The Karens fired hopefully but in a matter of seconds it was out of range, going into another tight turn. In a moment of heightened awareness Gilling saw that the panicky mule had broken free and was careering away, shedding its load. The rest were still on their feet. All around him he heard the thud of magazines being slapped home; of rifle-bolts being worked. A few men were scrambling to new positions, separating themselves from their fellows, rolling on to their backs in readiness for the Zero's next run.

It levelled off and came at them again, low, growing huge, frightening, its wings jazzing pin-points of fire. Patches of earth ripped up; spat lightning tufts of dust. The shuddering whine hurled itself at them individually, deafening, paralysing the muscles. Then, with noise like a thunder-clap the Zero crashed overhead and was past them, shrieking into the distance. This time it didn't bank, but kept on, leaving them. Its guns chattered once more, far off, as if from habit. Then it was gone, as suddenly as it had come.

Gilling waited a while before moving. His ears were still ringing and he found that his arms shook when he pushed himself up. Everywhere the ground was littered with bodies. For one awful moment he thought they were all dead, but they soon began to stir, cautiously, each man in apparent distrust of the silence and his own survival. He cupped his hands and ordered the platoon commanders to make an immediate casualty check. He couldn't believe they had escaped completely unscathed. The mules hadn't suffered, though;

he noticed that. And he could see for himself that the men nearest him were unharmed.

He cupped his hands again. 'Get that mule caught and loaded up—quickly!'

He kept one eye on the sky. There was nothing to be seen, but so long as they remained in the open he would never feel safe. He couldn't wait for the platoon reports to reach him, but hurried from one group to another. To his astonished relief the news was the same in each case—no casualties. It seemed too good to be true. At the very least he'd expected to be burdened with some wounded, but the fact remained that no one had been touched—not even in the sections closest to where the bombs had fallen.

Incredulously, he willed the luck to last. As soon as the loose mule was under control he started the company moving; stepped up the pace. The road was still all of an hour away. There was cover in plenty where the forest overflowed off the base of the hills on to the edges of the plain, but it was too far to their right to make the diversion worth while. In any case there was a sparse growth of trees less than a mile ahead which Gilling reckoned would offer reasonable insurance against a repeat attack.

They marched on, more watchful now; more widely dispersed. Reaction provoked thirst and the sun added to it, salting their lips with streams of sweat. Fifteen minutes brought the lead section to the beginning of the trees. They were few and far between, and a small herd of scraggy, hump-backed cattle stood listlessly in such shade as was offered. Nay Dun's platoon had already gone past and Gilling would have followed suit but for Saw Tun Shwe's exclamation.

'Look, thakin.'

Gilling slowed; stepped through the moving file of

the second platoon. The flanks of the nearest animal were covered with blood. Another stood on three legs, the dangling stump of the fourth gushing like a pumped tap. Those that could move lumbered away as Gilling approached, leaving six to stare, their heads lowered in terror. All were horribly mutilated and the sight turned his stomach over. The Zero's parting burst was suddenly explained. He drew his revolver and walked up to a wheezing cow, the side of whose neck was an ugly, bubbling cave, and shot it hurriedly through the head. It took a long time to go down so he shot it again, without skill but with great mercy. He shot them all that way, sometimes once, sometimes twice, and they watched him with accusing, pain-sodden eyes as though they believed him responsible for what had happened.

He was under the impression that the company had gone on, but when he had finished he found them waiting for him, like spectators who had witnessed some incomprehensible rite. Nay Dun was standing at about twenty paces' distance and Gilling thought he detected impatience in his bearing. He was still distressed by the animals' suffering and his own clumsiness and the subedar's hard-featured indifference angered him.

In a low voice, he snapped: 'Who gave the order to halt?'

'I did, thakin.'

'Another time wait until you get it from me—understand? Now, get them started again.'

Nay Dun nodded; wheeled. His voice rang out and the company moved on. With trembling hands Gilling slipped the revolver back into its holster. He took a last look at the stiff-legged carcasses around him, then walked away, confused in mind, knowing that what he had done was further proof of weakness and that some-

how, if he were to endure, he must learn to eschew pity; harden his heart. He must find an antidote for all the things that made him vulnerable. Pride alone was insufficient.

Somehow, he told himself, he must learn to hate.

CHAPTER EIGHT

They reached the road soon after three and rested for the customary period before turning east. The hills were fairly close now, their knuckled slopes clearly defined. A slight breeze moved over the plain like an exhalation of stale breath and the men lifted their faces towards it gratefully. They had borne up well under the throbbing heat and there were no stragglers. But there was a limit to what their stocky, overburdened frames could cope with and Gilling knew that the bridge couldn't come too soon for even the toughest of them. The mules, too, were beginning to look as if they had had more than enough.

The uncanny silence continued. They marched on under the discoloured sky, without rhythm, their feet dragging wearily in the dust which bordered the frayed edges of the road. The paddy fields were done with at last. To either side now there were feathery thickets of bamboo and banana clearings interspersed with areas of short, bleached grass. A village rose unevenly behind some bedraggled maize, the thatched roofs glossy under the sun. It was deserted. Dark lozenges of shade patterned the ground between the bamboo-plaited houses and no one moved on the small open verandahs. The bead-curtains hung motionless in the empty doorways. Everyone had decamped—and taken their belongings with them. A scabby, hairless dog yapped at them furiously as they passed through, but otherwise there was no sign of life.

Gilling had grown accustomed to these ghost villages. But here, fifteen or more miles behind the front,

the plague-stricken effect gave him an uneasy feeling, as though the Japanese were already pressing close on their heels. Instinctively, he looked towards the south-west, but all he could see were specks in the sky where vultures wheeled above the freshly-slaughtered cattle.

The vegetation thickened alongside the road. An overgrown stone proclaimed that it was twenty-one miles to Bandaung, which, Gilling calculated, meant that the bridge was approximately another four. The pace had slowed, but he was disinclined to step it up. His legs felt as though he had run a marathon and his feet seemed to be on fire; his boots several sizes too small. In any case there was no urgency now. He needed about an hour's daylight after they reached the bridge and he would get that all right. All being well they would be there by five. . . .

His train of thought was broken by the sudden dispersal of the leading platoon. Before he could rap out an order the rest of the company took cover, unslinging their weapons, crouching in the undergrowth. He went with them, then moved cautiously forward until he found Nay Dun.

'What is it, subedar?'

'A jeep, thakin.'

Gilling groped for his binoculars. His nerves were taut again; all his weariness gone.

'Under the trees. Two, three hundred yards—'

'I've got it.'

The vehicle came shakily into focus. It was parked where the road entered a broken tunnel of palms and was heavily camouflaged with light and shade. Even with the glasses it was difficult to pick out.

'There are four men, thakin. An officer and three riflemen.'

Gilling blinked sweat away, marvelling at the subedar's eyesight. There were four men, certainly—three in the jeep and one standing in the road. But they all looked alike to him except that the one beside the jeep was bareheaded. Nothing Church had said had led him to expect anything but an empty road. Uncertainty gripped him. The Japanese were using captured transport and uniforms and he feared a trap; an ambush.

'Are you sure?' he wanted to ask. 'Are you sure?' But he fought the temptation down, dreading Nay Dun's silent derision. Instead, against his will, he said firmly: 'I'm taking one of your sections, subedar. See that we're covered.'

A strip of maize bordered the road and he led the section at the walk along its other side, using it as a screen. The tousled heads of the palms soon showed above the crops and he walked more cautiously, stooping a little. After a while the maize thinned out and he could see the slight hump of the road through the flickering forest of stems. He motioned the section to wait and went on alone until there was a gap through which he could move without making a noise. He went crab-wise, with great care. He thought he was still about fifty yards short of the jeep, but the dry cough which suddenly froze him to a standstill came from considerably nearer.

Then he heard an exasperated voice exclaim: 'Bloody hell!'

He stepped out on to the road immediately, relief and curiosity possessing him as the tension broke. He recognized the solemn-faced men in the jeep as Shans from one of the L of C battalions. The other—tall, red-haired, moustached—was dressed in a non-regulation shirt, khaki slacks and suede shoes. He wore a lieuten-

ant's pips and carried a leather bandolier filled with 12-bore cartridges across one shoulder.

'Hallo,' Gilling said. None of them had seen him.

The officer spun round, rigid with shock. Slowly, his features relaxed.

'Good Christ!' he exclaimed. 'Where did you spring from?'

'I was going to ask you the self-same thing.'

The man shook his head, as if he had just surfaced from a dive, and dragged his hands across his eyes. 'God, you scared me out of my wits.' Recovering, he grinned faintly. 'Should I salute? Sorry to be so stupid, but they only bunged these things on my shoulders this morning. The name's Baxter, by the way. I'm with Grierson's, the timber people—or I was until a few hours ago.'

Gilling said: 'I'm not quite with you. What exactly are you meant to be doing?'

'I've been asking myself that all morning. They put me in charge of these three jokers here and—'

'"They"?'

'The military. Perhaps I'm not explaining myself very well.' He coughed—a dry, middle-aged smoker's cough. 'Griersons work the forests in this area. I've been plugging along as district manager as best I could, but a week or so ago I got word to start folding everything up. That's all done now, after a fashion, and I drove down to Gyobin yesterday and offered my services, if you know what I mean.' The reaction had made him voluble. 'A lot of fellows in the same boat as myself have been doing likewise. Anyway, to cut it short, they welcomed me with open arms. This morning they said I was Lieutenant Baxter'—he flipped his fingers—'just like that. I'd hardly signed on the dotted line before they pushed me off here.'

'To do what?'

'Keep an eye on the road as far as the bridge.' He waved an explanatory hand. 'There's a bridge a mile or two further on. They said that some of our chaps would be moving up towards Bandaung during the afternoon. I was just beginning to think something had gone wrong and that I was going to find myself stuck here for life.' He said cheerfully: 'You probably heard me letting off steam.'

Gilling nodded. 'I could also have shot the lot of you.'

Unabashed, Baxter said: 'I suppose you're right. Just as well you weren't the Japs. We've cruised up and down this stretch for the last few hours and all the time I've been asking myself what the hell I'd do if they actually turned up. It's all very well for the boys in Gyobin to tell me to skedaddle back immediately. We hardly constitute a war-party, the four of us, and I can't see anyone being scared by my fancy dress.'

Gilling couldn't help smiling. 'Well, you can skedaddle now.'

'Saved by the bell.' Baxter frowned. 'You aren't on your own, are you?'

'Hardly.'

Gilling turned and signalled Nay Dun to bring the company on. As they formed-up on the road Baxter gave an admiring whistle.

'Christ,' he said. 'That's more like it.'

'When were you last at the bridge?'

'About an hour ago I suppose. Not a mouse stirring —not there, anyway. But we heard a couple of explosions and some machine-gunning a few miles to the south of here at about the same time. Plane, I thought it was, but it's pretty thick by the bridge and we

couldn't see much. Worried me, I don't mind telling you.'

The company moved towards them, 'Karens?' Baxter asked.

'Yes.'

'I'd feel a darned sight happier with a lot like that around me.' He paused, then swung into the driving seat and switched on. 'Well, I'll get on back to my lords and masters—whoever they are. What are you doing? Staying on here indefinitely?'

'Sort of,' Gilling said.

'Rather you than me.' He went on thoughtfully. 'They must be scraping the bottom of the barrel to have given a new boy like me a job like this. How d'you reckon things are going?'

'Not too well, I'd say.'

'Any chance of holding them, d'you think? Hanging on until the rains bog everything down?'

Gilling shrugged. 'God knows. I'm only a company commander—'

'You look damned impressive to me.' Baxter was having trouble getting into gear. 'I'm such a flaming amateur that I don't even know how to drive the thing.' He grinned sheepishly as the gear at last crashed home. 'Any messages—or is that another example of my ignorance?'

'Just tell them you made contact with the Frontier Rifles company.'

'Is that all?'

'Yes, thanks.'

'Right. . . . Will do. 'Bye.'

He accelerated away between the oncoming Karens, ploughing rim-deep through the dust. Gilling joined the company as it came abreast and marched on with them, reflecting on the unconscious irony of some of

Baxter's remarks. The unexpected meeting had made him uneasy again. Ever since the Zero's attack he had been eager to reach cover. Yet now, perversely, he had a yearning for the open spaces. The old longing for the proximity of his own kind revived, and several times he turned his head to watch the dwindling plume thrown up by Baxter's jeep as a castaway might stare after the smoke of a receding ship.

CHAPTER NINE

The road entered the broken light of the forest edges and the tired drag of their feet sounded almost crisp under the roofing of trees. After about twenty minutes the levels ended and the road went into a gentle, serpentine climb which continued for all of half a mile. No sooner had they breasted the long rise than a descent began. The air grew sticky; the undergrowth more lush. The sun leaned shafts of brilliance through the cavernous, submarine gloom and clouds of butterflies drifted past like shoals of gaudy fish. The noise of insects was everywhere, as if a thousand telephones had been left off the hook, and despite their weariness the Karens looked about them as they laboured along, like men come home.

The bridge hid itself until the last moment. Then, as the forward platoon rounded yet another bend, it suddenly appeared before them. For fifty or sixty yards the road became a ledge, carved into the hillside, sloping down to meet the bridge at a right-angle. On the other side of the stream it turned sharply again and climbed in similar fashion out of the narrow valley.

Gilling remembered the bridge as soon as he saw it. Two years earlier, on the drive to Bandaung, he'd thought how like a trestle-table it looked. From bank to bank it wasn't more than forty feet long and it consisted of wooden planking laid over a steel frame. There were timber rails along either side and widths of double planking set a wheel-track apart down the centre. The stream had gouged a fairly deep course and the banks were sheer, not only at the crossing but

as far along as Gilling could see. The water was low, now—a comparative trickle—and the cracked mud of the exposed bed was strewn with boulders and stunted thorn bushes.

He noticed these things as he jarred down the descent to the bridge. Encouraged by what he saw his eyes roved quickly over the steep slopes beyond. It was a strong position, and once the bridge was blown it would be stronger still. Even with limited fire-power they could do damage here; make anyone sent against them think again. All along he had clung to the hope that an early setback would put an end to the enemy's interest in the road, and now the hope strengthened. Yet, at the same time, a curious sense of unreality brushed his senses. They had side-stepped the war for a few hours, but from dawn tomorrow the way would be open for it to flood towards them again. And when it came they would meet it here. Here. . . . It gave him an odd feeling, almost of disbelief, that this was the place where he must deliberately renew contact with fear.

The hollow thud of the planking sounded under the company's step and Gilling felt the bridge shiver as it took their weight. Directly the last section was across he gave the order to halt and sent for Nay Dun. The subedar strode towards him in apparent contempt for his compatriot's exhaustion and saluted with his customary violence. He was like a machine and there was something challenging even about his stamina—as if in this, too, he demanded an example.

'Thakin?'

Gilling glanced up from the demolition plan. 'I'm blowing the bridge straight away, subedar. Get everyone out of distance until the job's over. We can think about platoon dispositions afterwards.'

He studied the demolition plan again as Nay Dun urged the men to their feet and marched them away. There were four charges, fused for simultaneous firing. Looking over the railing he could see the protective pyramids of sandbags around the base of each of the trestle-legs. The leads were buried in the top of the near bank and he found them without difficulty, together with the water-proofed tin containing detonators, tape and safety-fuse. His experience of explosives was limited to a three-day course taken shortly after joining the battalion and he was glad Nay Dun wasn't present to see his nervousness as he made his preparations. He cut two lengths of safety-fuse so as to minimize the chances of a misfire. Each was three feet long and he crimped the ends into the detonators with his teeth before taping them to the exposed leads. By the time he'd finished he could hardly see for sweat and his hands were trembling feverishly.

He glanced hurriedly behind him to check that the road was clear, then struck a match, holding it to the open fuse-ends. As soon as they began to spit he backed away and started up the incline, remembering the training injunction not to run. It suddenly seemed an immense distance to the top. Well before he got there there was a cold chill on the nape of his neck and he almost panicked himself into believing that he'd erred over the fuse's burning-speed. It needed all his determination not to sprint the last few yards, but he was thankful he controlled the impulse.

Nay Dun was waiting for him at the bend and it struck Gilling that the subedar was watching him and not the bridge.

Fully another half-minute elapsed before the detonation and with every second the silence became

more ominous. Then, just as he was beginning to accept that something had gone wrong, the small valley was split horizontally by a flash of orange flame. The air shuddered and went grey. Simultaneously, a swelling cauliflower of earth and water obliterated the bridge and soared upwards, flecked with whirling pieces of wood and metal. The roar of the explosion burst against their eardrums and the blast swayed the tree ferns on the hill-side; lifted the road's powdery surface. The sound chased away along the valley, but where they stood there was a moment's absolute quiet. Peering through the thinning dust, Gilling could see that the bridge had completely disappeared. Then the debris started coming down and everywhere the evening sky was full of screaming birds.

An enormous satisfaction possessed him. Straightening himself, he faced Nay Dun with a spontaneous gesture of relief. 'Well—that's that. . . . Post a Bren-gun section forward as a precaution, subedar. Otherwise the men can cool off for a while—the water will soon clear. And get the mules seen to and the cooking started. I'll leave the details to you. The light won't last for ever and I want to recce this side of the stream while I've still got the chance. I'll meet platoon commanders here in three-quarters of an hour.'

They parted company and Gilling began his reconnaissance, starting where the road plunged into the blanched flood of the bed. All that was left of the bridge were four stumps rooted astride the stream's channel and a jagged width of planking which protruded from the far bank like a diving-board. He worked his way a couple of hundred yards in either direction, clambering from point to point on the overgrown slopes, seeking the best lines of fire; the most suitable cover. Below, as he traipsed about, the Karens

thrashed naked in the shallow water. Smoke rose thinly from the cooking fires and the mules voiced their content. The war seemed a million miles away and he found himself increasingly released from the demoralizing pessimism of the last thirty-six hours. Extreme fatigue was a drug, blunting his imagination, and when he eventually allocated the platoon commanders their positions and responsibilities he still couldn't entirely believe that he was setting the stage for death; tempting horror to come to close quarters.

The light was going fast as he went down to the stream and stripped off. The marbled water was like balm. He sat waist deep and let it flow past him; cupped it wonderfully over his head and sweat-inflamed shoulders. It was a week since he had been out of his boots or washed in more than a half-bucket of water. The purplish dusk was noisy with the gargling bleat of frogs and the incessant whirr of cicadas. A troop of monkeys crashed invisibly through the dark trees, but his nerves were off the rack and their hollow screaming caused him no alarm.

Refreshed, his limbs tingled and the coarse print of socks and webbing left his skin. He was in no mood to analyze his state of mind, but he thought: I was all right with the bridge. And when the Zero attacked. And when we were in doubt about the identity of Baxter's jeep. I was a bit shaky then, perhaps, but I could have been worse. He's had nothing to find fault with today. . . .

Tomorrow would put him to the test again. He couldn't seriously delude himself that it would be otherwise. From dawn onwards the road would be open. It was too inviting to be ignored. Tomorrow the Japanese would come. Yet, for the time being, the inevitability of what was in store was overshadowed by

intense physical relief and the accrued satisfaction of the day now ending.

I was all right with the bridge, he repeated mentally. Something went my way for a change. He probably didn't think I could do it.

He. . . .

At all costs he mustn't lapse again and expose himself to Nay Dun's scorn. He must continue to live the previous night's humiliation down. Today he'd succeeded. Tomorrow he must succeed again—and the day after, and the day after that. It was going to be like fighting two battles at once.

CHAPTER TEN

THE night passed. The moon was released at about eleven, giving shape to the forest. By dawn there was a dank chill in the stagnant air and pearly smears of mist lay over the stream. The fireflies vanished as the shadowless light strengthened and the morning's insect-chorus began.

The strangled cry of a jungle cock woke Gilling and he looked down at the gap where the bridge had been and the sloping ledge of the road with the glazed eyes of someone piecing a dream together. It was exactly six o'clock. For a few seconds he remained inert, gathering his thoughts. Then a feeling of urgency brought him stiffly to his feet. Yesterday's vague sense of disbelief had gone right out of him. Everything now was starkly real and significant and there was an uneasiness in his stomach which was akin to nausea. He sought refuge from his nerves by making a thorough reappraisal of the company's position—re-siting a section, checking camouflage, ordering some dead ground to be staked with sharpened bamboos. They still had an hour or two's grace. It was reasonable to suppose that a little time would elapse before the Japanese patrols probed sufficiently far forward to discover that the road-junction was theirs. Even so, it wasn't the moment to take chances. The mules were brought up from the stream and harboured on the road well to the rear. Once the morning meal was disposed of the cooks were sent back to join them. Gilling widened his reconnaissance and acquainted himself more fully with the approaches to both banks; instruct-

ed platoon commanders to do the same. An advance section had the road under observation almost half a mile to the west, and its members were so placed that warning of the enemy's approach could be hand-signalled back within seconds of their being seen.

By nine o'clock there was nothing more to be done. Only the waiting remained. The sun lifted clear of the trees, varnishing the still leaves, curling the last thin skeins of mist from the valley floor. One platoon faced the crossing and descending ledge of road. Another, spread wide, covered the thickly-wooded slopes to either side, the Brens angled so as to rake the bed of the stream. Nay Dun's, less the advance observation section, Gilling kept in reserve.

It was a good position. Nothing had changed his mind about its strength. But he could have done with at least one platoon more to extend his perimeter. There was real danger of encirclement if he made the mistake of holding on too long. Once they had disclosed their whereabouts the Japanese would start to work round them. It was inevitable. The certainty grew in him as the morning passed. A setback here wouldn't make them withdraw to the plain. When they came they would come with intent—and they would very soon realize how slight the opposition was. Yesterday he had duped himself; bolstered his morale with wishful thinking. Whatever happened here would be only the beginning.

The hours stretched out, each an unfulfilled threat. A fever-bird sang, heightening the tension. At noon he waded restlessly across the stream and went forward to the observation point. Two men were there and he stayed with them for a while before retracing his steps and climbing back to his place on the defended hill-side. A fierce perpendicular light bore

down upon everything and the Karens lay hidden from it under the dense foliage, cramped in their scooped-out pits, as motionless and silent as the valley itself.

Opposite, where the road appeared, a solitary rifleman kept vigil, the last link in the chain from the observation point. Scarcely a minute went by without Gilling looking anxiously his way, but always he looked in vain. As the afternoon wore on they heard the dull beat of massed aircraft somewhere above the plain and it distracted him for a while, focusing his thoughts on the division, the battalion, on Church and Abbott and Crawford and the rest. He envied their propinquity, one with another. He could have done with one of them with him now—Abbott, preferably. With Abbott he could ease his mind again; release some of the pent-up strain. Even to have a tyro like Baxter close at hand would have been better than having no one at all. Nay Dun was no substitute. He couldn't say to him: 'I hope to hell they don't wait until dark. If they do, I'm going to feel they're round at the back of us right from the start.' Nor could he say: 'All this waiting's giving me a bout of the shakes again. What in the blazes do you think they're playing at?' Transposed into the stilted limitations of his Burmese such admissions would be tantamount to an outright confession of fear; of unworthiness to command. They would be answered by the subedar's hard, reptilian gaze and the gulf between them would be widened still further.

A British officer led; set an example. During twenty-one years as a soldier it had never been otherwise. . . .

Another hour passed, screwing Gilling's nerves, but there was still no signal from the other side of the valley. He suffered on in isolation, thoughts ferreting,

watching the sun's accelerating decline. At four-thirty he had the mules taken hastily down to the stream and at five he ordered water bottles to be refilled and platoon runners to carry food to the men. The waiting had become almost intolerable and, hungry though he was, he had to force himself to eat what Saw Tun Shwe brought him.

All day he had braced himself against the enemy's coming. Now, little by little, his resolve began to weaken and he toyed with the idea of pulling out at dusk. The division would be on the move again soon afterwards, leap-frogging back another ten miles or so, and it was tempting to think of keeping level with them. His job was to deny free use of the road; not to defend any one particular section of it. The high banks of the stream were sufficient to prevent wheeled transport moving further towards Bandaung and they could booby-trap the bed sufficiently well to discourage the rush construction of ramps. By dawn tomorrow they could have blown the road south of the town and have the company entrenched above it. . . .

The idea gathered weight, but he couldn't free his mind to act. The very strength of the position argued in favour of their remaining where they were and, in the end, he compromised. They would go at midnight. It was almost beyond belief that nothing would happen before then, but at least he had set his nerves a time-limit. He would wait just seven hours more.

The day burned itself out and the valley seemed to contract. Stars pricked through, investing the forest with a ghostly sheen, and the night grew eerie with noise. The forward section had been relieved at dusk and the observation point withdrawn to about a hundred yards west of the stream; the rifleman opposite

equipped with a torch. Seven o'clock came and went. Seven-thirty. Eight. And as Gilling peered across at the shadowy ledge of the road he began to feel that there had never been a time when he had done anything else, never a time when he hadn't been at the mercy of his imagination.

Bleary-eyed, he stared into the starlight, willing the remaining hours to pass. Fireflies drifted slowly beneath the forest's broken roof, but nothing else stirred. Gradually, his lids began to droop. The ceaseless crepitation of the night became a soporific and he could feel himself being dragged down into sleep. He fought against it for as long as he could, but eventually he dozed.

A chattering burst of sub-machine-gun fire jerked him abruptly into consciousness. The echo was still hammering along the valley as he gathered his startled wits together and scrambled to his knees. For a moment he could see nothing to warrant the firing. Then another burst came from the slope directly below him and a ragged volley of rifle-shots sounded from widely-separated points over the hill-side. In the same instant he saw movement in the undergrowth on the far bank of the stream and, in the stream itself, a spreadeagled body.

He sculled across the ground on his forearms until he found Nay Dun. The firing was growing in intensity and there were answering flashes from the other side.

'What happened to the signal?'

'There wasn't one, thakin.'

'Are you sure?' They had to shout.

'Sure, thakin. No signal.'

A Very light fizzed up from the platoon facing the crossing and broke high and sodium white, illumina-

ting the valley with a dazzling, flickering glare. When it died the night was suddenly coal black and the stars seemed to take time to reappear. The firing was almost continuous now, rattling back and forth along the facing slopes. A mortar came into action from somewhere down the road and the first shell burst in the trees within yards of where Gilling lay, deafening him, spattering him with leaves.

Dazed, he squirmed to a better vantage point. Two things were already clear. The Japanese were without transport—otherwise their approach would have announced itself. And the advance section had somehow been surprised and overrun.

A ricochet sobbed past. In a moment's near-quiet he distinctly heard the dud tennis ball sound of the mortar loosing off again and he gritted his teeth as he waited for the shell to strike. When it burst, low on the hill-side, he raised his head and stared across the star-green trough. As he did so a score or so Japanese rose from the level ground on the far bank and jumped into the bed. Long rifles chest high, equipment flapping, they sprinted forward. None got far. The Brens cut them down and only one reached the stream's channel. For what seemed a long time he waded unscathed, firing an automatic from the hip, and Gilling could see the spent cases flicking out like sparks. Then he splashed headlong and the water bore him away.

Another Very light soared and lit the scene. The firing died and came again, as though wind-blown. A second wave of Japanese made a concerted, simian rush upstream of the wrecked bridge but they were stopped by grenades and withering crossfire. Smoke curdled the bitter air, and the arcs of tracer were as swift and bright as shooting stars. For minutes on end the night was ragged with fierce cries and the swift

thunder of explosions; the stuttering bark of small-arms. Then, as if by mutual agreement, silence filled the valley. It was so intense by contrast that the faulty thump of Gilling's heart seemed to boom out like the beat of a loose-skinned drum.

Hardly had he grown used to the silence than his name was called from the other bank.

'Captain Gilling.'

He stiffened, frozen in disbelief. He heard Nay Dun grunt.

'Captain Gilling,' The voice floated across the narrow valley, hoarse with appeal, and fear brushed his nerves. 'This is Ba Tin, thakin. Naik Ba Tin.'

Ba Tin commanded the advance section. . . . Oh Christ, Gilling thought, appalled.

'The Japanese want you, thakin. They want to talk to you.'

There was terror in the voice. A torch was switched on at the bend of the road and the naik was suddenly illuminated. He was all of sixty yards away but he seemed closer, projected clear of the shadowy background by the wavering torch-light, and he stood like an actor awaiting prompting.

'The Japanese want to talk to you, Captain Gilling. . . . This is Naik Ba Tin. Rifleman Saw Pah is also with me.'

Gilling stared at him as if mesmerized. Rance was in his mind, and fear moved through him like a looseness of the bowels.

'Captain Gilling. . . .'

He shut his eyes. Time was suspended. He covered his face with his hands and listened to the naik hoarsely repeating his name. A cold sweat broke out of him and it began to seem that he wasn't listening to Ba Tin

at all but to the mouthpiece of something indescribably evil.

All he could think was: *Why weren't you killed? Jesus Christ, why weren't you both killed?*

His orderly crouched beside him and on a desperate impulse he leaned over and grabbed his rifle. But in the same moment, with malicious timing, the torch was extinguished. Seconds passed, then the firing started again. For a short while he was almost oblivious of it. Ba Tin's voice haunted him, louder even than the crash of mortar shells. But soon, unnerved now, he sensed movement along either flank and within half an hour he gave the order to withdraw.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEIR rendezvous was the sixteenth milestone. They took up a hastily improvised position and waited for the stragglers. Two or three joined them quite soon; another, wounded, after several minutes. The moon was coming up and Gilling knew that he dared not delay too long. Yet he continued to wait. More and more of the road became visible, bandaged in a layer of mist. Unidentified shapes became trees, rocks, bushes.

Another minute, he thought, fretting. I'll give them another minute. . . .

The decision was no sooner made than two more figures appeared, one behind the other. They came slowly, partially dissolved in the mist. Neither was armed. Both were hatless. As they came closer he supposed them to be blinded for he could see now that they walked with stumbling uncertainty, their hands held out in front of them like feelers.

Without thinking he jumped up and went to their aid, driven by an instinctive compassion. They were still thirty yards away, breasting through the loose swathes of mist, when recognition gave him a sharp nudge of dread. Naik Ba Tin was in the lead; Rifleman Saw Pah following. For several strides he continued to think they were blind, despite the fact that their eyes were open and straining desperately towards him. But a moment afterwards, at twenty paces, he was terrified to see that their lips were roughly sewn together with twine.

Horror possessed him. His scalp seemed to shrivel.

But he still hadn't grasped the full hideousness of what had happened. Not yet; not completely. The stumbling men came closer, making small sobbing noises, their hands moving in supplication, their eyes dilated with shock and pain. Their cheeks bulged in an unnatural way but even so he didn't completely understand. Then suddenly, there was nothing to hide their bodies from him any longer and all at once he saw the blood-sodden crutch of their trousers and knew, as he vomited, precisely what the Japanese had done to them.

PART TWO

THE TOWN

CHAPTER ONE

The men died within the hour, but it was longer before Gilling groped his way back across the threshold of sanity. His mind was deranged beyond the bounds of squeamishness and he performed obscenities of mercy which, even then, he knew would brand his memory throughout his lifetime.

Early on, Nay Dun came to him and said: 'It would be better to shoot them, thakin.' Gilling rounded on him almost hysterically and ordered him away. He stayed at the road-side waiting for the end, and as waves of revulsion swept through him he began to think: Why not? You shot the cattle. And this is worse. A million times worse. You were about to shoot Ba Tin when they had the torch on him. So why not now? . . .

But he could not try. Try as he might he could not. His senses were sodden through and all he could do was tilt his water-bottle against the torn lips and will the men to die quickly. Outwardly he was calm, but his thoughts were in a state of raving disorder. Nothing seemed believable any longer, but he clung in confusion to the pitiless moral law. And when at last the moaning ceased he sat and shivered by the two bodies, hating himself.

There were tears in his eyes as he got up. He didn't give a damn whether Nay Dun saw them or not. He was beyond caring about anything for the moment. Like a sleep-walker he moved to the centre of the road, deep within himself, distressed to a degree that he had never before experienced.

He didn't belong here. He was a civilian; a bank employee. His mind screamed. He was afraid—sickeningly afraid. There was no escaping this fear; no elbowing it aside. This time it had to stay.

The road curled northwards and began to climb. The company moved along it towards Bandaung, trailing a rear-guard section. Eighteen men were missing and three wounded. Two of these could walk but one rode in agony roped to the least burdened of the mules.

The feeling of nightmare kept pace with Gilling as he marched. They passed through an empty village where spindly bamboo tables on which food and drink were offered to the spirits stood like gibbets against the sky. An animal screeched in the forest, checking him in his stride, bristling his nerves. Everything he saw and heard was alien, barbarous, and every step he took seemed to be leading him further and further into isolation.

For a mile or two he remained steeped in a welter of terrible imagery, but after a while a corner of his mind hazily began to free itself. Only now was he beginning to realize what a risk he had taken by remaining so long at the sixteenth milestone. If the Japanese had decided to follow through from the bridge it could have been disastrous. He flushed as the thought struck him, and he wondered suddenly if that was why Nay Dun had suggested shooting the two men. Was it merely to save time and reduce the risk of being attacked in an untenable position? He called the subedar's expression as the last of the maimed cattle went down. Hurry, it had said. This is a needless delay. . . .

Ahead, between the lurching, moon-dappled files of the leading platoon, Nay Dun moved with a purpose-

ful roll, his short hillman's legs untroubled by the gradients. Three times in as many days he had shown himself impervious to varying degrees of horror—first with Rance, then with the cattle, and now with his own men. On each occasion the mask-like features had remained set; the gruff voice unchanged. His mind was as emotionless as his body was iron-hard, and in that he typified the majority of the company. A few had reacted, visibly recoiling from the roadside scene —Saw Tun Shwe among them. But in the main they had been silent, seemingly neither aghast at the brutality and suffering nor imaginative enough to realize that what had happened once could happen again. It was their great strength, Gilling realized, and in Nay Dun it had reached its peak. Six months ago he had been prompt and skilful in dealing with snakebite, but Gilling could see now that it was no more than a ruthlessly practical act. He was a fanatic. 'Shoot them,' he had said, and it was the counsel of military expediency. Compassion didn't come into it—nor was there any moral law. This was the jungle—a place of spirit-gods and cabalistic tattoos. He belonged here; the Japanese, too. It was as much their world as his and he could accept their bestiality. There was nothing he couldn't bear to look upon, nothing he couldn't endure, nothing he wouldn't do to defy them, The make-believe was over and this was its fulfilment. And if the British officer was too weak to lead, then he would.

All these things Gilling believed, and in his anguish he hated him.

CHAPTER TWO

They marched on through the glistening night climbing slowly into the amorphous wilderness of hills. For a while Gilling fell back and moved with the rear-guard, frequently turning to peer behind and listen. Even when he was satisfied that there was no immediate pursuit he continued to crane nervously over his shoulder, like someone possessed of an incurable habit.

The road followed the contours in a snaking, corrugated incline. Sometimes it ploughed between the breasts of dark slopes: sometimes it became a narrow shelf, the open side plunging into deep, forested troughs. Scarcely a mile passed without Gilling seeing at least one likely defensive position, but he ignored them all. The road was ready for demolition on the hairpins just short of Bandaung and he had no intention of stopping until they got there. He wanted something around which he could base his defence and a blown road was better than nothing. Their combatant strength was down to under sixty and they hadn't the fire-power to hold anywhere at will. At the bridge the Japanese had appeared to be without transport, but they could quickly race some through from the plain if they chose and it would require no great feat of engineering to make the stream passable. His estimate was that the Japanese already outnumbered them by two to one, but the situation could change in a matter of hours. By morning they could find themselves up against a battalion; armoured cars and tanks, even.

It was imperative to get behind the demolition, but they couldn't expect to reach the hairpins until after daylight. It was past three o'clock and there were still about ten miles to go. The best he could hope for was to arrive around seven. The calculation injected fresh urgency into his stride and he moved up and down the double line of weary men, telling them to keep closer order. They seemed devoid of all apprehension, but instead of being grateful for their continued stolidness he found himself growing increasingly on edge.

Fear was still loose in him, like a moth spasmodically at a flame, and the groans of the wounded rifleman on the mule seemed to echo the night's horrific sins. And there would be others committed. Over and over his mind said it. Rance was the rule, not the exception. Somewhere, some time, there would be others—as raw and as ghastly.

'What sort of war *is* this?' Perry had asked that morning by the pagoda. He could tell him now. Jesus, he could tell him now. . . .

Bitterly, he wished he had booby-trapped the bed of the stream. A few well-placed grenades would almost certainly have gained them an extra hour or two's reprieve. He wasn't thinking very clearly and some time elapsed before it dawned on him that it would be equally effective if he booby-trapped the road itself. The thought had hardly taken root when they reached a sharp U-shaped bend and he saw the forward platoon splash through shallow water.

The sight of it made him change his mind about marching non-stop. He halted the company at once and sent for Nay Dun. 'Five minutes, subedar. Let the mules make use of this—God knows when we'll find any more. Then take over rear-guard. We won't be

resting again until we get between the first and second milestones.'

It occurred to Gilling then that the runnel was as good a place to plant grenades as any. Better, in fact Most of the road was powdered with dust, but here. where the water glassed over, the surface was pebbly, offering natural camouflage.

'And, subedar—'

'Thakin?'

'Let me have those grenades you're carrying.'

They were slung on Nay Dun's webbing, the pins splayed and bent back. Obviously puzzled, the subedar unhooked them and handed them across. Gilling examined the ground while the mules nosed eagerly at the water. It wasn't difficult to decide where to bury the grenades, and as soon as the mules had finished he ordered Nay Dun to take the company clear.

'Booby-traps,' he explained curtly, the grenades balanced in each hand.

The subedar nodded. 'You want help, thakin?'

'No.' Gilling said. And with a vehemence that surprised him, he thought: Not from you, I don't.

He waited until the last man had kicked through the water, then chose a spot near the runnel's edge where the ground was only a little moist. He uprooted a half-covered stone with his heel and knelt to scoop the hole deeper. Then he laid one of the grenades in the hole and replaced the stone. Satisfied, he lifted the stone again and took the grenade out. It looked like a small, oiled pineapple. A mosquito sang a warning in his ear as he straightened the soft metal of the pin. All at once his hands were clumsy. He held the lever down and removed the pin, then fitted the grenade back into the hole, keeping pressure on the lever

with the tips of his fingers. With his other hand he reached for the stone and laid it over the hole. Gradually, with trembling care, he began to ease his fingers free. As they slid off the lever he heard it grate against the under-side of the stone and for a desperate moment he thought it must have lifted sufficiently to release the firing-pin. His heart seemed to miss a beat. Slowly, now, he took his weight off the stone, pound by pound, ounce by ounce, watching to see whether it shifted. A long time seemed to pass. Then, gingerly, his hand came free and he backed away, sweating an ice-and-fire sweat.

Given the slightest encouragement the stone would move and the lever fly off. Four seconds later the grenade would explode. . . .

He gave the spot a wide berth and tiptoed through the water. On the other side he dug out another stone and buried the second grenade. Again he lived through the self-imposed torment of doubt as he increased his trust in the stone's weight. But at last his hand lifted clear and he got up, dry-mouthed, and moved cautiously towards the waiting company.

Twice more he placed grenades—one wedged beneath a fallen branch which he dragged out from the bank; the other in the dust under an exposed length of heavy bamboo. If they inflicted casualties, well and good, but their main purpose was to slow the Japanese down; make them hesitant. Fear had given him cunning and several times during the next couple of hours he got Saw Tun Shwe to cut additional bamboos and strew them significantly across the road. Each one he saw as a flimsy barrier against their being overtaken before they could reach the demolition, but at the

same time the inadequacy of what he was doing caused him despair.

The gradients became more severe; the route more tortuous. All around them the night ticked and whispered. Now and then the skyline showed itself, etched like a graph through the lowermost stars, obliterating all but the tilted rectangle of the Great Bear. Bandaung was close behind the jagged crest; the hairpins somewhere in its shadow. The moon rode shoulder-high, but its light was merging into the greyness of approaching dawn. Another day was coming to burn and blister and Gilling made a renewed effort to increase the tempo of the march. The men stared at the road in front of them, apparently oblivious of his continued urging, and in his anxiety their fatigue seemed unreasonable. He shouted at them angrily, trying to goad them into a last-lap effort, but to no avail. There was no response at all now. They were at the end of their tether and even Nay Dun's barrack-square vernacular could get nothing more out of them.

They reached the foot of the hairpins as the sun rose, and again Gilling remembered the scene, recalling the low-geared ascent of two years ago. At first glance it looked a formidable obstacle. For all of a quarter of a mile the road zig-zagged across the escarpment, cut into the wooded face like a giant staircase. To either side were precipitous, overgrown slopes and gaunt outcrops of moss-covered rock stained white with bird-droppings.

Nay Dun took the company on to the first milestone while Gilling unearthed and fused the demolition-set. It was two-thirds of the way up the escarpment, marked by an inconspicuous wooden stake. According to the plan the entire central section of one diagonal ledge of road had been mined, and he allowed an extrava-

gant amount of safety-fuse to ensure himself a comfortable getaway. Nerves had kept his own exhaustion in check until now, but as he fumbled with tape and detonators his body shook uncontrollably. The fuse-assembly bounced in and out of focus and a pinkish light discoloured everything he saw. Time and again he had to pause until his vision cleared, but at length he was ready.

Without further delay he lit the twin fuses and retreated, his skin prickling in anticipation of the explosion. He reached two ledges of the road higher before the detonation shook the ground under his feet. Columns of earth and rock soared like poplars, each one separate, each with a short-lived core of flame. They remained poised for a split second, tall and opaque against the morning sky, swirling within themselves. Then they joined and became a wall which slowly subsided, leaving only a pall of dust filtering over the sun and the place where Gilling had flattened himself.

He had no sense of satisfaction, as at the bridge. Even after he had clambered down to survey the damage and seen the great avalanche spilled from the raw, chancred quarries all he felt was hopelessness.

CHAPTER THREE

He sited each platoon and left them to entrench themselves. Below, the foothills were spread like a map, their crumpled green monotony softened by veils of mist which still defied the early sun. Here and there the road was visible and Gilling put his binoculars on to it, doubtfully tracing its route through the roof of the forest, searching for signs of movement. Four or five miles away an unbroken length showed itself like a newly-healed scar and he gave the glasses to his orderly, telling him to keep it under constant watch.

Aching in every limb he climbed back to the cutting where the mules had been taken. The wounded rifleman was silent now, his face the colour of putty, his eyes closed. Only the quick, soft pant of his breath showed that he lived.

One of the cooks said. 'He is dying, thakin,' and Gilling nodded, numbed with weariness. It wasn't the fear of death that worked in him, but of what had happened at the bridge, at the road-block, and a sort of rage quivered through him that they should be expected to fight in this fashion, with a field-dressing as the ultimate medical aid. He looked pityingly at the dying man, remembering his stoicism on the mule, and with lead in his heart he thought: You were lucky, God help you. At least you weren't taken prisoner. . . .

He collected half a dozen grenades from one of the reserve boxes, primed them, and returned to the escarpment. A fever-bird was calling again and he

abused it as he slithered down over the rubble. A hundred yards in advance of the base of the slope, at points in the road and on the banks where men might approach under cover, he began to lay more booby-traps. He placed them as an insurance against surprise, having made up his mind not to expose another section to the danger of being overrun. Between grenades he paused, breathing deeply, steeling himself for the next. Twice, glancing up the hill-side, he saw Nay Dun, arms akimbo, apparently watching him from one of the hairpins. And the second time he muttered: 'Leave me alone, can't you? For Christ's sake, leave me alone.'

Eventually, hands on thighs, he made his way back to the walnut tree under which Saw Tun Shwe had stationed himself.

'Anything?' he asked.

'No, thakin.'

He took the binoculars and studied the distant stretch of road. The last of the mist had evaporated now and the reddish scar was sharply defined, angled slightly across a knuckled green spur. But nothing moved along it; no dust showed. He was as much mystified as relieved. The delay didn't make sense.

'Keep looking,' he said.

Turning, he found Nay Dun waiting for him. 'Yes?'

'There is no water, thakin.'

He flared. 'I'm not blind, subedar.'

Undeterred, Nay Dun said: 'The nearest is in the town—'

'This side of the town,' Gilling corrected. 'There's a lake by the golf course.'

A ridiculous sense of triumph welled through his fatigue. He knew Bandaung. It wasn't the jungle. The

town was his preserve—familiar, civilized. For once he wasn't at a disadvantage.

'With your permission,' Nay Dun said, 'I will detail a party—'

'Later.' He expected the inevitable salute, the impassive about-turn, but the subedar did not move. With hostility, Gilling repeated: 'Later—understand?'

'I understand.'

'Very well.' He gestured irritably.

'There is something else.'

'What?'

A barking deer coughed within earshot. A pair of huge red butterflies tumbled past, joined together, mating. Life was everywhere: life and death.

'There is a track, thakin.'

'A track?'

'Into Bandaung.'

'Where from?'

'The sixth milestone. It runs to the east of here, through the village of Meingyi.'

Gilling said: 'How do you know this?'

'Meingyi was once my village.'

Their eyes met, held each other, and the subedar's seemed to say: 'I knew about the lake by the golf course, too, but it is unimportant. The track is vital, though, and you were ignorant of it.'

'It isn't on the map,' Gilling said, looking.

'The village is, but not the track.'

'Tracks die out,' Gilling said defensively. 'Change course.'

'This one is still there.'

'What makes you so sure?'

'I saw it last night—when I was rear-guard.'

Sharply, Gilling said: 'I should have been told.'

Antagonism compounded with his growing dismay. 'Why wasn't I told, subedar?'

'I camouflaged it, thakin. Nothing else could have been done in the time.'

'I'm the best judge of that, surely?'

The words mocked him. His thoughts were going in all directions at once. Anger and alarm competed for possession of him. A nervous tic flicked his left eye, advertising his trepidation.

'The camouflage will stay fresh for a day,' Nay Dun was saying, 'but it would be wise to keep the track under observation. It meets the escarpment about a mile from here.'

He pointed eastward through some sprays of bamboo, but Gilling stared at the distant spur to the south where the road showed. The rock-faces to either side of the hairpins precluded the possibility of rapid encirclement and he had been thinking only in terms of a frontal attack. But now he found he had a reason for the enemy's non-appearance.

Eyes screwed against the harsh light, he asked: 'Would you say the sixth milestone is beyond that stretch of road?'

'Yes, thakin.'

He had feared as much. 'Send three men to the village,' he said urgently. 'No more. See they've got a Very pistol. And go back into the town itself with the rest of that section and find out where the track leads in.'

'I already know, thakin.'

Without meaning to, Gilling said: 'Where?'

'Above the bazaar.'

'Go and check—on the town, too.' He snapped it out, reacting against the feeling of diminished authority. 'And be back by ten hundred.'

Swaying on his feet he watched Nay Dun depart. His small feeling of triumph had shrivelled like a deflated balloon. He gazed uneasily across the motionless ocean of the forest, questioning fretfully whether the Japanese had discovered the track and, if so, how long ago. It was nine now. They could have had knowledge of it for at least a couple of hours, in which case they might already be well on their way. They would have heard the detonation when he blew the road; deduced from their maps where it had happened and been encouraged to try an alternative route. . . . He reasoned with mounting concern. On the other hand, he told himself, they would have no idea where the track went and might decide not to waste time on it. *Might.* And there was always the possibility of Nay Dun's camouflage fooling them. More than once, during training, he had stood within feet of the subedar's handiwork and been completely fooled himself. But he lacked confidence in it now.

'Anything?' he asked his orderly again.

'No, thakin.'

He was in dread of their coming, but he willed them to appear on the road and release him from uncertainty. Sheltering beneath the walnut tree he waited, his craving for sleep destroyed. There was no alternative but to wait. It would be madness to pull back and leave the escarpment undefended without proof of a flanking movement. Yet if and when the proof was established it might be too late.

He clenched his hands. 'Come on,' he urged aloud. 'Come on, sod you.'

The rifleman was dead when Gilling next climbed to the cutting where the topmost ledge left the hillside. He cut the red identity-disc away and put it in

one of his ammunition-pouches along with those of Ba Tin and Saw Pah. 'Animist' was stamped into the disc, but he said the Lord's Prayer over the body and told the cooks to bury it before the flies got worse and the vultures arrived.

Forty-five minutes had elapsed since the men left for the track, but no warning Very light soared from the forest to the east and he took heart. He made use of the time touring the weakened platoons, encouraging the sunken-eyed section commanders to complete their preparations as quickly as possible. He didn't spare himself. Layer upon layer of weariness ached through him, but he was restless and moved endlessly about the escarpment as if in search of something he had lost.

Gunfire trembled in from the invisible plain to the west of them. Earth and sky were merged in a lilac band of heat and he studied the map, guessing at the division's whereabouts, wondering how the battalion fared. It was almost impossible to believe that he would ever rejoin them. Time had lost its shape. Gyobin was still two days away and every hour had become a nerve-racked lifetime of existence. The sense of horror was never entirely absent from his mind, and willing the Japanese to show themselves like deliberately encouraging a nightmare to return. But knowing where they were was better than not knowing; seeing them was better than having the imagination run riot. . . . Inexplicably, though, the road remained deserted.

Nay Dun returned shortly before ten. His sweat-polished face told Gilling nothing.

'Well?'

'The track comes in above the bazaar, thakin.' His tone was matter-of-fact, but to Gilling it seemed to

avoid insolence by a hair's-breadth. 'And the town is empty.'

Gilling had expected as much in view of the lack of a signal from the direction of Meingyi, but confirmation added a final touch of relief. He sucked in air thankfully.

'Very well. The mules can be watered now,' he said, 'and something done about starting a meal. Get the men's bottles collected first, then send the cooks and the walking wounded back to the golf course. They'll probably find running water in the clubhouse. Tell them to hurry,' he added curtly. 'We may not have long .'

Nay Dun nodded. He turned to one of the riflemen who had accompanied him and waved him forward. To Gilling's surprise the man was carrying a monkey.

He said: 'What's this for?'

'For strength, thakin.'

The subedar grabbed the monkey and held it in front of him, proffering it. There was blood on the ginger-grey fur and Gilling imagined the animal to be dead, but the black, rubber-band lips suddenly parted, emitting a piteous squeal, and the brown eyes opened, huge with pain and fear.

'For strength, thakin,' Nay Dun repeated. 'For you.'

'No.'

Gilling looked away, but—sidelong—he saw the subedar draw his chopping knife and cut the monkey's throat with a swift, expert movement.

'Thakin,' he said again, pushing the monkey forward, thumb pressed on the severed artery.

'No.'

Gilling shuddered. He knew what store the Karens put on monkey's blood. He had seen them drink it; seen them and been revolted. And now, as Nay Dun

lifted the limp bundle of fur and let the blood dribble into his upturned mouth, his stomach heaved. There was terror in this, too.

'Good thakin.' The subedar swallowed, mouth and chin stained raw, proffering the monkey yet again.

'Take it away.'

He saw no generosity in the subedar's insistence; only a barbarous taunt. The sight of the blood was a mnemonic of all the vile and horrifying visions from which he had tried desperately to escape all day.

He shut his eyes. 'Take it away,' he shouted. 'Take it away, d'you hear?'

CHAPTER FOUR

TIME passed without sign of the Japanese. The men snatched an hour's sleep, turn and turn about. Gilling slept, too, plummeting abruptly into a deep, dreamless oblivion from which his orderly roused him at noon. He awoke with a gasp, eyes focusing in bleary alarm. The first thing he heard was the low drone of aircraft somewhere over the plain and the dyspeptic crump of distant explosions. The sound gave an edge to his mind and he sat up, startled. But his orderly shook his head.

'Nothing, thakin. Still nothing.'

At nineteen, Saw Tun Shwe was four years his junior. Nay Dun had paraded him for consideration the day Gilling joined the battalion. 'A volunteer,' the subedar had said pointedly. Even by Karen standards he was on the short side, but his lack of inches was no measure of his strength and determination. Stripped, he had the body of a dark-skinned pocket Hercules. Indefatigable, uncomplaining, zealous—he was all these things and Gilling had never regretted having accepted him. Abbott often jokingly referred to him as 'The Shadow' and there was a dogged loyalty about him which Gilling had long since taken for granted. But now, glancing at the young Karen's gaunt, pock-marked face, he found himself curiously drawn to him, grateful suddenly for his constancy and unquestioning respect.

He gazed at the road on the spur and said thickly: 'They're taking their time.'

Saw Tun Shwe agreed. 'It is like waiting in a tree for the tiger to come.'

'I've never done that.' It was a relief to talk; to know that another experienced the finer shades of fear.

'You feel he is somewhere near, but the waiting is bad for the nerves.'

'Captain Abbott called it "Micawber business".'

'Thakin?'

' "Micawber business",' He spoke without thinking, dulled with weariness.

'I don't understand, thakin.'

Gilling tried again, but without success.

'Micawba?' Saw Tun Shwe frowned, making it sound like a Burmese place-name.

'Yes, Micawber.' Desperately, he said: 'He was a person in a book.'

He might have been in conversation with a child. And as he laboured to clarify his meaning he grew vividly and hopelessly aware of the totality of his isolation.

Birds planed in to their nesting-places on the rock; broke from the baize-green swell below like skittering flying fish. But where it mattered—on the road and from the track—nothing showed. Gilling left the walnut tree and climbed a tonsured hillock which stood back from the escarpment. Southwards, he could see no more than from elsewhere. But most of Bandaung was visible to the north and memories stirred in him as the actuality matched his recollection. The tin roofs of the town itself made a huddled patchwork of rust-brown terraces around which, on slopes and knolls, timbered bungalows stood amid orderly patterns of white-fenced gardens. He picked out Flagstaff House, the tennis courts beside the Bandaung Club, the squat shape of the Protestant Church. Roving, his eyes iden-

tified the Colonial and Overseas Bank's rest house, the swimming pool, the Cottage Hospital and the P.W.D. bungalow. Nearer, on the golf course, the water of the lake was heavy with the reflected weight of oaks, and he saw the broad swathes of the fairways and the bunkers around the small sandy 'browns'.

The flaccid marker-flags hung as if in surrender; as if confirming that the town was dead. Despite Nay Dun's report it gave Gilling a pang of despair, almost of deprivation, to find it so. The bungalows, he remembered, had names like 'Meadowside' and 'Midlothian' and 'Glenbarr', and roses and geraniums flourished in the gardens amid the bougainvillea and hibiscus. There had been swimming parties, dinner parties, dancing. And there had been a girl called Ailsa Seymour. . . .

He thought of it all with defeat. Neither what had happened then nor what was happening now seemed entirely real. Even the town didn't seem real, somehow. Held in the sun's blazing amber it had the look of an abandoned relic of the past. The watered lawns and immaculate gravel drives and wrought-iron gates belonged elsewhere—half the world away, where his own roots were. Soon, now, everything would have been engulfed, just as fear and horror and self-doubt had already engulfed him. It had been a gay place once, a sane and nostalgic oasis, with dew on the grass at dawn and women driving into the bazaar to shop as if they were in a Sussex market town. And now it was doomed; as empty and deserted as he felt himself.

He turned his back on it and stared at the road ahead, wretched and confused. The flame of the match was invisible in the glare as he lit the last of his crushed cigarettes. Replacing the matches in his breast pocket his fingers touched a piece of folded paper

which, when he drew it out, he saw was a letter from his father. It was the only one to have reached him since the Japanese came into the war. Dated 8th December, it had taken its time to get to him, being delivered only a few days before the battalion moved into the line near Pegu. It was weeks since he had last looked at it. Sweat had blotched the thick, angular writing along the folds, but none of it was indecipherable.

My dear Tony,

By the time this arrives you will probably be well and truly in the war. Yesterday's attack on Pearl Harbour has come as a great shock, and this morning I heard on the news that our fellows have already been in action in Hong Kong and on the north-east coast of Malaya. I dare say you're relieved that it's at last come to a head for I know how frustrated you were feeling. But, naturally, I'm anxious about you. Burma looks a goodish way from the flash-points at the moment, but this is obviously only the beginning and the fighting is going to spread.

All I can say is that I'm glad you've had this last year's experience of soldiering. The training will prove itself invaluable if and when it comes to the real thing. We didn't have half enough in the 1914–18 *show and most of us were pitchforked into the trenches after only a few weeks in uniform. I'm also glad that you've got such a first-rate second-in-command in this man Nay Dun. He's going to be a tremendous help to you in every way.*

Except for the odd hit-and-run raid it's been pretty quiet here just recently, but I've been as busy as could be at the library. More people seem to be reading than

ever before, though it's a pity they need a war to encourage them!

Write when you have the chance. Your last took only three weeks, incidentally, which is a lot quicker than some. Good luck, Tony. My fingers are crossed for you and dozens of friends send kind wishes.

Your affectionate father,
Charles.

P.S. I'll write again soon, at greater length, but I wanted this to go off at the earliest opportunity. If circumstances prevent you from receiving any mail for a while, don't think you aren't in my thoughts. You are, and will be, constantly—as well as the fellows you command. I know you're going to find them pure gold—particularly now you've had so long together and got to understand one another. And I know they'll find you the same.

Gilling put the letter away with a groan. Beard-stubble rasped as he rubbed his hands over his face. His eyes stung. Slowly he mastered emotion, drawing deliberately on the remains of his cigarette.

Oh Christ, he thought simply. Oh Christ.

The jungle dissolved; solidified. Incredibly, a cuckoo started to call from the plantation of pines fringing the nearest fairway on the golf course and the pure, faint notes seemed to split his mind. Trembling, he stood up, and as he did so he saw his orderly signal violently from the shadow of the walnut tree.

He lumbered down the reverse slope of the hillock and ran, crouching, to the vantage point.

'Trucks, thakin.'

Trucks. . . . He took the binoculars; fiddled them into focus. He saw a little dust to begin with; then, immediately afterwards, the first of several vehicles. It

was moving slowly and he had time to recognize it. Even at that range he could tell it as a three-tonner. The next, unmistakably, was a Fordson fifteen-hundredweight. Another Fordson followed, after which six more three-tonners went by—greenish-brown, familiar in outline despite their minuteness.

Ours, he thought. They're using ours. . . .

'How many went through before I got here?'

'Four.'

'Sure about that?'

'Sure, thakin.'

Thirteen in all. The road was empty now. Two hundred men, say. . . . There was a tightness in Gilling's chest.

'There were also men on foot,' Saw Tun Shwe said.

'How many?'

'A handful only.'

'No more?'

'Four or five—moving in front.'

A key turned in Gilling's mind. Booby-traps, he congratulated himself—because of the booby-traps. That's why.

Without taking his eyes off the road, he said: 'Warn Subedar Nay Dun and the other platoon commanders. Everyone to stand-to. No one to open fire until I give the order. It'll be a longish while yet.'

He'd urged them to come; to show themselves. And yet he dreaded what he'd seen. Two hundred, at least. . . . A part of him quailed.

CHAPTER FIVE

THERE were three other places where the road was visible. The nearest was perhaps a mile away; the most distant twice as far. It was on this heat-blurred twist of brown that Gilling concentrated, but forty minutes passed before the convoy again nosed into view. This time he saw for himself the midget figures walking in front—three now, he thought. They were spread out across the road about fifty yards ahead of the first truck, and the convoy moved after them by fits and starts as if caught in a traffic-jam. He could see the Japanese in the trucks, too—solid loads of men, packed close. The trucks looked no larger than toys.

They were in view for a couple of minutes before the jungle covered them up. A quarter of an hour went by before Gilling had another glimpse of them, thinly veined-over by branches. They were bigger now, though still like models on a playroom floor. It was uncanny to be able to see them and yet to hear nothing. In ten minutes they would be exposed for the last time before nearing the base of the escarpment, and the fact that he could plot their progress made the suspense all the more difficult to bear. There was an unnerving quality about the inexorable pace of their approach—as if a fuse were burning down.

The tic started flicking Gilling's left eye again. He lay in the fractured shade of the walnut tree and waited for the convoy to emerge into the sunlit gap a mile away. It arrived punctually, almost to the minute. He counted the men in front—still three; the trucks—thirteen. They didn't look like toys any more and he

clearly saw the troop-loads sway as the vehicles lurched over some ruts. He thought he could hear the massed growl of engines and the small sound was menacing, bringing his nerves to fever pitch.

'Thakin.' Nay Dun was suddenly at his elbow, clutching binoculars. Gilling hadn't heard him come. 'Those men on foot—'

'What about them?'

'They are Karens, thakin. Not Japanese.'

Gilling stared at him stupidly. 'Karens?'

His mind whirled. He put the glasses on the road but he was too late to see anything. The last of the trucks had vanished.

'Karens,' Nay Dun repeated flatly. 'From Naik Ba Tin's section. I recognized them myself.'

'At that distance?'

'With these, yes.' The subedar flourished his binoculars. 'I am not mistaken.'

Against his will Gilling believed him. He turned his head, dismay in full flood. 'The bastards. The bloody bastards. Those grenades. . . .'

He broke off, mesmerized by Nay Dun's expression: *You* put them there, it accused. They were your idea.

The sound of engines thrust at them like the muffled snarl of an animal, unmistakable now. Instinctively, Gilling peered at the matted surface of the forest, but his only thoughts were of the booby-traps and deceptions he had planted along the way; his only feeling one of guilt. For what seemed a long time he suffered within himself, but gradually his dismay soured into bitterness and his mind cried out: How was I to know this would happen?

He spoke it aloud: 'How was I to know?' But the subedar was squirming away to his platoon without

appearing to have heard and there was no one to say—as Church had once said: 'Don't reproach yourself.'

Sick at heart, Gilling listened to the low, oncoming growl and as it grew louder he experienced the returning prick of fear. In a few minutes more the trucks would halt and the troops deploy. Without hope he considered the pattern of what would ensue; wondered how long it would be before sheer weight of numbers forced them off the escarpment. Sixty against two hundred or more—it was a cowering thought. And he still wasn't certain about the track; not even now. For all he knew another column was working around to their left and he continued to shoot an occasional anxious glance in the direction of Meingyi.

It was exactly quarter to three when he suddenly realized that the only thing he could hear was the sawing of cicadas. With his binoculars he followed the road from the lowermost hairpin to where it disappeared under the trees, then searched the patches of broken light along the length of their front. There was nothing significant to be seen, but the feeling of being under observation was intense, almost physical. Somewhere in the submarine shadows below he knew that every ledge of the road, every square yard of the escarpment, was being subjected to the closest scrutiny. There was a dreadful inevitability about the silence. Soon, now, a move would be made; the probing begin. They'd hardly delay—not unless they were waiting to synchronize their assault with a flanking movement. Again he looked towards the hidden village of Meingyi, doubt reviving, but again he saw nothing.

Only one thing was certain; they wouldn't get the trucks beyond the escarpment in a hurry. This time the demolition called for something more than a little makeshift engineering. Throughout the day the extent

of the damage had been his sole encouragement; the one guarantee against a break-through which could rush the Japanese into Gyobin in a matter of hours. But all at once the future had ceased to exist. Here and now were all he could cope with; the next few drawn-out minutes. Cautiously, pressed flat, he studied the scrub which fringed the forest edges. They were there, somewhere. He could sense their presence, their nearness; picture their stealth as they moved into position. His mind was transfixed, but dread crept about inside him like a living thing and the dry, sour taste of it found its way into his throat as if pumped there by the heavy beat of his heart.

He spared his watch a glance. One minute to the hour. . . . He was in the act of lifting his eyes when Saw Tun Shwe nudged his arm. In the identical instant he saw three men debouch from the trees and start to walk slowly up the road. Through the binoculars they seemed almost close enough for him to reach out and touch them. He recognized them at once as Karen riflemen. They wore no hats and had been stripped of their equipment, but it was a few moments before he realized they were joined, waist to waist, by a slack length of rope.

Appalled, Gilling knew why they came; their function. Anger and pity and guilt were all compounded in his thoughts as he watched them. They walked as if in a stupor, shuffling their feet, wandering about the road. They had no choice. Somewhere out of sight behind them machine-guns were trained on their backs. He stared at them in a fascination of horror, measuring the distance between them and the area where he had planted the booby-traps. There was something diabolical about their being roped together. It was

terrible to see their downcast heads and reluctant, suicidal step; to live their thoughts. They came slowly, condemned yet clinging to life, not knowing which way they would die.

When they were about thirty yards from the first grenade one of them strained up at the escarpment in mute appeal. Something seemed to snap in Gilling's brain. He pushed himself on to his haunches and cupped his hands to his mouth.

'Run!' he shouted. 'Grenades. . . . Off the road!'

His voice cracked. For a second or two, suspended in time, there was utter silence. Then, from all over the escarpment's face, the company hoarsely echoed his warning.

'Run, brothers! . . . Maung Daw, Hla May. . . . Off the road, brothers! . . . Chit Kin. . . . Get to the bushes! . . .'

The men stopped between strides, petrified with hope and alarm, incapable of action. Even as they hesitated the Japanese opened fire. A flurry of dust lifted off the bank just ahead of where the trio stood: simultaneously the guttural hammering of a machine-gun reached Gilling's ears. Life jerked into the men's limbs. Desperately they stumbled towards the roadside scrub, and it was only then that Gilling realized their feet were hobbled. The shooting came again, from several points now, and the road surface pitted and spat as if under hailstorm. Two of the men went down instantly—one floundering like a landed fish—anchoring the third. For a brief period the survivor struggled on the end of the rope, working his arms. Then, like a full back fielding a long kick, he suddenly jack-knifed over and slumped on to his side.

Stunned, Gilling watched the dust thin out. He

looked down at the bodies roped in death on the road and asked himself how much longer he could endure this kind of war.

I as good as killed them, he thought. Them—and the others who didn't get this far.

CHAPTER SIX

ENCOURAGED by the silence the cicada-rasp picked up again; birds emptied out of the blazing sky. As a precaution, having shown himself, Gilling edged clear of the walnut tree. Finding cover behind some boulders he mouthed at his orderly to join him. After the firing the quiet was all the more nerve-racking; the renewed waiting charged with the shock of violence. Grimed with sweat though he was, Gilling's teeth chattered as he scanned the exits from the forest. He felt cold, even in his bones.

Once, as his eyes glossed over the dead Karens, he recalled what Church had said the morning Rance was beheaded—'You couldn't have anticipated this sort of thing.' And he thought: I should have learned by now. Dear God, I've had warning enough.

He was no longer able to hide his fear. The twitch of his eye and the feverish spasm of his lower jaw proclaimed it. Secretly, he pleaded for an excuse to turn tail and withdraw immediately to the final demolition. In a surge of weakness he ignored the dangerously-balanced equation of time and distance that separated the Japanese from Gyobin. He tried to persuade himself that a few hours lost, a few miles abandoned, would do no harm. They could hold the road elsewhere. There were other places. . . . The urge was to get away—anywhere. Anywhere would do.

The crisis lasted only a short while. Nerve-taut, soaked with fatigue, his mind cleared. The temptation was still with him, but—deep down—he knew that he'd got to live with himself when this was over—and

live with Nay Dun while it lasted. He was in no state to appreciate that these considerations carried equal weight; to realize that the contemptuous challenge of the subedar's yellowed eyes reflected nothing more than his own estimation of himself. All he understood was that he couldn't face Nay Dun and give the order to pull out. And for that reason he feared and hated him—as if he were a second enemy, as demanding as the Japanese were merciless.

Ten minutes had passed since the firing ended but already they seemed like hours. And nothing had broken the daubed pattern of scrub and shadow out of which the Japanese must eventually emerge.

But at last, with a sharpness that made Gilling stiffen, he heard the *punk* of at least three mortars loosing-off almost simultaneously. Moments afterwards, preceded by a moaning compression of air, the shells exploded on the escarpment. Jagged buds of flame splintered into leaping fans of earth. Leaves showered like confetti and the blast swept up the steep hill-side, flattening the grass, whipping against covered faces and screwed eyes. Hardly had the air cleared than another salvo burst on the wooded slopes, black and orange-red, deafening.

There was nothing to draw the Karens' fire. Scattered about the slopes around the hairpins they could only lie in their hollows and suffer the bombardment, lifting their heads between explosions to watch for the first signs of the Japanese breaking cover. Of necessity the assault would be frontal—out of the forest and through the sparse scrub until it reached the base of the escarpment, after which the road would have to be fought for ledge by ledge. There was no other way for them to come—except by looping round into Ban-

daung along the Meingyi track. When the mortars opened up Gilling was inclined—once and for all—to discount the possibility of the Japanese having discovered the track's existence. But the longer the bombardment continued on its own the more uncertain he became. Time and again he looked for the warning Very light, and though he looked in vain the suspicion grew that they were merely being kept occupied while their flank was turned.

For half an hour without pause the hill-side erupted under the concussive impact of high explosive and it was almost a relief when he eventually saw the first wave of Japanese rise from the shadows below and start towards them. The mortar-fire intensified, but with it now was the crisp, stammering note of rifles and automatics from both sides. Gilling watched the green-khaki figures jink through the scrub. There were about thirty of them that he could see and from his high place they looked deformed, ape-like as they ran with their weapons carried low beneath their forward-leaning bodies. Half-dazed, he glimpsed another extended line of men rise unevenly to their feet and start in pursuit. Some fell almost at once; some made a few yards and went deliberately to earth. But others came on, determined, dangerous, straightening up as they met the rising ground, lifting their spiked rifles. 'Banzai!' they shouted, and the cries sounded inhuman; animal. A few got as far as the first ledge and Gilling heard the sharp crack of grenades—though whether the nearest Karens had thrown them or they were the ones he had planted he couldn't tell.

A bitter-smelling haze hung in the foliage; swirled around blast-stripped branches. The atmosphere sucked this way and that; rattled and pounded. Flames licked among shattered prongs of dry bamboo, drib-

bling tendrils of smoke. Men cried out, their voices harsh; high-pitched. And once, in a momentary pause, the mules linked the stuttering clash of sound with their own terror.

A third wave of Japanese started on its way and Gilling ducked as fragments from a mortar-shell jarred the boulder in front of him. Already he was wondering how long they could withstand the pressure. Despairingly, he wished they were better equipped to hit back. A single mortar could have plastered the forest edges; a handful of cup-dischargers could have hurled grenades into the intervening areas of scrub. But they had neither. Rifles and grenades apart, their armament consisted of three Brens and half-a-dozen light automatics. Moreover, their ammunition was limited and the Brens couldn't go on pumping out cross-fire indefinitely. It would be an achievement if they denied the escarpment until sundown.

Despite his anxiety he was strangely free from panic. For the time being his powers of imagination had been immobilized. His stunned concentration was riveted on the scene below and all thoughts of the Meingyi track had been blasted out of his mind. He watched the enemy come stumbling forward; the line break as the others had broken. As before, a percentage kept their feet and lodged themselves under the lee of the lowermost ledge. Fearing a build-up at such close quarters he started to slither down the hill-side, grenade in hand. He had gone less than twenty yards when, by chance, he saw through an oblique gap in the trees one of the Japanese mortar-crews in action. There were two riflemen within earshot and he yelled at them to quit their weapon-pit and join him.

'There.' He pointed, jabbing the air, short of breath. 'Over there. See them? Three hundred yards.'

He waited until the Japanese kneeling beside the mortar was hit, then moved on down the slope, leaving the Karens taking slow, deliberate aim. Foliage stung his face and arms. Zig-zagging, he followed the beaten grass lanes between weapon-pits and the lower he went the more intense the firing sounded. As he reached the exposed area around the demolition a shell struck into the broken shelf close to his right and the blast threw him off balance, rolling him into the open. It was several seconds before his brain cleared. Drunkenly, he raised his head. The din was suddenly muted and he didn't immediately appreciate the danger of his situation. The roped Karens near the base of the escarpment looked very close and, almost curiously, he noticed a swarm of butterflies lift off the bodies as a ricochet broke dust over them. Then, as his wits gathered, he felt scared. Cumbered with equipment he sprinted for cover, throwing himself behind the bole of a teak tree. He was beginning to feel dreadfully alone, yet he was impelled to go on. He made for what he thought was an empty weapon-pit, only to find that he landed on top of a dead rifleman. The hot gasp of air expelled as he crashed down, the yielding softness of the limp body, drove him away. Baboon-like, he raced to the pits covering the second hairpin. The Bren-gunner alongside whom he went prone spared him the briefest of glances, then snapped a short burst into a couple of Japanese heaving themselves on to the road. They were near enough for Gilling to see their knee-high puttees, the baggy trousers, the cloth pouches slung across their chests. One collapsed, but the other scrambled back into safety. Dead or alive, their comparative proximity was brain-chilling.

Moving again, Gilling found the junior platoon commander, Jemadar Saw Bwe. Sprigs of leaves were

stuck in his hat-band. Mouth-to-ear, the jemadar shouted: 'Some are working towards the rock-face on the left.'

A shell exploded with a cataclysmic roar. Bullets tore through the varnished undergrowth and the sound was like someone flipping a pack of cards.

Gilling bawled back: 'What about the dead ground in front of you? Can't you get at them there?'

'No more grenades, thakin.' The jemadar's skin had the bluish tinge of extreme exhaustion. His eyes burned. 'All used up.'

The grenade in Gilling's hand committed him. 'Cover me, then.'

He went forward, crawling down the steep slope. When he was about fifty feet from the lowermost ledge he eased out the pin and tossed the grenade high, controlling the throw. It pitched on the lip of the road, roughly where he had hoped, and bounced over and out of sight. Earth and stones rocketed up as it detonated, and the sharp, ear-splitting crack was followed by a scream that made his stomach squirm.

He made his way back to the jemadar, eyes screwed in a permanent wince. 'You've got to keep them off this ledge. Think you can do it?'

'I've three dead and five wounded—'

'Can you do it?'

'For a while, thakin.'

Gilling nodded. 'Keep me informed.'

He struggled away, feeling like a deserter. Another wave was on its way in across the scrub, but he was more worried about the Japanese who were endeavouring to get a foothold on the rock-face. On the way up he found three more dead Karens and one, a lance-naik, wounded in the chest. He got his shoulders under the lance-naik's body and carried him pig-a-back, some-

times on all fours, sometimes in lumbering rushes. The air barked and whimpered. A bullet smacked into the ground near his head and glanced off with a fluttering sigh. Gritting his teeth Gilling humped the N.C.O. over the loose surface that had avalanched down from the mined road. Here and there, as he went higher, he passed weapon-pits; saw glistening brown faces under broad-brimmed hats—fierce, sullen, shocked, leaden-eyed. They were faces he knew—comrades, brothers in arms—yet somehow they had lost their identities. They belonged to strangers, all of them—strangers who peopled a demented dream.

He had nearly reached the point where he had left the Karens sniping at the Japanese mortar-crew when he felt the swift pressure of air that heralded a shell's arrival. He squeezed himself against the hill-side, cringing under the lance-naik's weight, fingers clawing into crumpled leaf-mould. The explosion almost disintegrated his senses. The wounded man was torn from his back and there was a sudden numbing pain in his right calf. Looking up he saw a turmoil of earth and leaves and, through it, with horror, the twitching, dismembered remains of the two riflemen. He rolled over and groped frantically towards the lance-naik, only to find that he, too, was dead.

An acrid stench was lacquered to his throat. Whirling cores of light coloured his vision. He crawled through a tunnel between clumps of bamboo and hauled himself up the last few yards to the boulders. Saw Tun Shwe was there and said immediately: 'You're wounded, thakin,' but Gilling shook his head. He could feel nothing now and the blood tacking the shirt to his shoulders was the lance-naik's.

'No.' It emerged as a whisper. He shut his eyes, but even the darkness rocked.

'Your right leg,' he heard.

They ducked as metal zipped invisibly overhead. On the slope above them a withered tree vanished in an oily blossom of flame.

'Get some grenades down to Jemadar Saw Bwe,' Gilling panted, but the words were lost in a sound like a wave breaking.

'Thakin?'

'Grenades. . . . Jemadar Saw Bwe. . . . Quick as you can.'

His orderly scuttled away. Alone, Gilling pressed his head into the crook of his arm. His body shook. The smell of blood was sickly-sweet and nausea ebbed and flowed. After a while he propped himself on his elbow and glazedly surveyed the scene below. Smoke drifted over the hill-side, veiling the scrub. The fighting seemed to be concentrated in the area of Saw Bwe's platoon but there was also an increase in the firing on the left of their front.

Peering that way, Gilling suddenly saw a Karen run to the edge of the rock-face and drop a grenade over. He was quite exposed, yet he stood on the brink, a submachinegun at his hip, and began shooting with controlled deliberation. It was several seconds before Gilling realized that he was watching Nay Dun in action. Silhouetted against the sky, stubby legs planted wide, the subedar continued to spray sharp bursts at an almost vertical angle. He was a magnificent sight—defiant, utterly contemptuous of danger. His whole bearing testified that what he was doing came as naturally to him as the flinging-up of a salute. He needed neither fear to prompt him nor the desperate summoning of courage. He was a soldier, and this was how a soldier acted and carried himself. . . .

He stood on the cliff edge like something shaped out

of the stone, ferocious, indestructible. And in the quivering, nerve-jangling aftermath of his own exertions, Gilling knew that he could never match him; never—even in enmity—find enough to best his challenge.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE sun was low now, red and swollen, and the first hint of dusk was in the air. Only an occasional mortar-shell thundered tongues of flame, but the rattle of small-arms continued incessantly and, as the light thickened, the winking flashes showed Neon-bright against the forest.

The Karens were still in possession of all but the first two shelves of the road. The scrub was a graveyard and no new attack had come in for some while. But Gilling wasn't deceived. Inevitably, as soon as it was dark enough, the Japanese contained along the escarpment's base would be reinforced from across the scrub; a fresh assault made on the upper levels. And this time it was bound to succeed. There would be no holding them once they could move unseen and worm in close, and the prospect of hand-to-hand, cut-throat fighting was something Gilling dared not even contemplate. Mentally and physically he felt as though he had been pole-axed, but his imagination was becoming increasingly inventive and could still tap the icy, inexhaustible springs of fear—particularly now that darkness was on its way.

What had happened at the bridge and at the culvert could happen again. Here; tonight. . . . What had happened on the road below in mid-afternoon could be repeated tomorrow. . . . Details of the atrocities were stuck like transfers to his brain, hideous and demoralizing, and his skin crawled when, unbidden, the thought of being taken alive possessed him.

He flinched as a shell exploded in the branches of a

nearby tree. His nerves were scraped raw and the simplest decision called for an immense effort of mind. For a while, despite Saw Tun Shwe's insistence, he had been incapable of grasping that he had himself been hit. But gradually, as the numbness thawed and pain became a searing fact, he realized that his right calf-muscle had been drilled through within an inch of the bone. Already there was a marked stiffness, as if his flesh were hardening, yet mercifully his movements were unhampered.

He scrambled from one platoon to another in the gathering gloom, ordering them to carry their casualties back to where the mules were. Singly and in pairs a few Karens scavenged the hill-side and Gilling despaired as the total of those incapable of fending for themselves mounted. There were twelve in all. For some reason, despite the intensity of the bombardment, he hadn't expected to be burdened with so many. Half as many again had been killed, yet because his senses were surfeited with the simplicity of death he could accept their loss. But the helplessness of the maimed roused in him both dismay and complaint.

Angry snatches of firing came from forest and scrub. A lone shell whooshed down and the mules tethered in the cutting jigged in panic, ears flattened. The wounded were laid out under the bank where the cooks had earlier lit their fires and one glance was sufficient for Gilling to see that some would only live a short while. To move any of them—crudely and in haste—would seem a sadistic crime. Yet it would be a bigger crime if they were abandoned; one which his conscience would never stifle. At all costs they must be salvaged and borne away.

Distractedly, he sent for Nay Dun. He was back at the boulders by then, flinching periodically, growing

in bitterness and despair. The subedar's platoon, already depleted by the loss of Ba Tin's section, was the weakest of the three; the easiest spared.

Nay Dun came like a lizard, fast and low, and Gilling said; 'How many of yours are still on their feet?'

'Ten, thakin.'

'Including you?'

'Eleven, including me.'

'There are a dozen badly wounded. We can't leave them. There's only one way that I can see—for your platoon to pull out now and take them with you; one apiece.'

Gilling paused. It didn't seem like his own voice somehow. Nay Dun said: 'What about the extra man?'

'I'll see to him.' A Bren chattered. Gilling tried to blink the darkness away. 'Start immediately. We'll give you half an hour, then we'll follow. Wait for us at the third milestone north of the town.'

'Very good, thakin.'

'Get the mules back, too.' A thought struck him; a stab of guilt. 'The men on the track will have to take their chance. They know the RV.'

To his astonishment, Nay Dun said: 'I have already called them in.'

'Since when?'

'Forty minutes ago.'

Gilling bristled. 'On whose authority?'

'They were wasted where they were. The Japanese will never use the track now.'

'On whose authority?' He was slightly hysterical. 'Who's in command of this company?'

Nay Dun said nothing.

Enraged, Gilling went on: 'I've warned you before, subedar—'

Chips of stone broke whining from one of the

boulders and Gilling flinched unashamedly. Looking up, he had the impression that the subedar hadn't moved. There was a lengthy silence between them. A ridiculous phrase, a hangover from school, simmered hotly in his mind—'I'll speak to you about this afterwards.' The logic of Nay Dun's initiative seemed a reflection on his own competence. He felt further diminished; impotent. Swallowing, he forced himself to say: 'Counting them, you're only eleven strong?'

'Eleven, thakin.'

In the fast-fading light, rimmed by the black line of his chin-strap, Nay Dun's face was impassive; his bead-like eyes appraising and unafraid.

'Get going,' Gilling snapped, unable to hold their gaze. 'The half-hour starts now.'

He needed him, yet he wished him out of his sight.

The sun had gone behind the rim. Forest and scrub and hill-side began to merge. Gilling moved the remains of one of Saw Bwe's sections over to the left to help plug the gap created by Nay Dun's departure. They were desperately vulnerable. Eighteen killed, twelve wounded. Nay Dun and ten others gone. . . . The arithmetic appalled him. The escarpment was held by no more than twenty Karens.

The firing dwindled as the night congealed; gradually died away. A bird called, testing the silence, and the sound had an eerie quality. Every time Gilling glanced at the luminous glow of his watch the hands scarcely seemed to have moved. He lay by the boulders with Saw Tun Shwe, thankful for his presence, straining ears and eyes. The darkness tightened its hold, and as it contracted he could sense the proximity of the Japanese as one senses the existence of another person in the same room.

Nay Dun would be nearing the town by now. Another ten minutes and he ought to be clear. . . .

A Bren coughed briefly. The silence poured in again. A scatter of stars was shivering through and Gilling shivered with them, willing the minutes away. Once, his orderly touched his arm and nodded towards the scrub. He could see nothing. 'What is it?' he breathed, but Saw Tun Shwe shrugged slightly and shook his head, as though he had been mistaken. Only the trees which stood against the sky were recognizable. Everything below was fused together; opaque, without dimension. Yet, Gilling knew, the Japanese were somewhere on the move, coming in stealth across the scrub; working in towards the protection of the escarpment's base. He could feel it happening. It was only a matter of time before they abandoned caution. He lay waiting, tensed for more terrors, and the darkness seemed to shift and lump together, changing shape whenever he blinked.

If it hadn't been for the wounded he could have quit already; gone while the going was good. He looked at his watch again. Fourteen minutes since the subedar left. The party should have about reached the town. . . .

A single shot rang out, replied to by a trigger-happy burst from one of the Brens. Then silence—a long elastic silence, drawing out to snapping-point, breeding doubt and misgivings.

Now was the time to disengage. Now. . . . All his instincts told him so, yet he clung to his intended schedule, honouring the half-hour promised to Nay Dun, bound to it in desperation by the sense of challenge imposed upon him. A minute elapsed: another. Sweat trickled in greasy streams. A bird called again and the gurgling thread of sound brushed his nerves with alarm. His eye-muscle jerked furiously as he

peered into the darkness and he began to feel that there was no one on the escarpment except the Japanese and Saw Tun Shwe and himself.

Nineteen minutes. . . . Stars were pricking through in groups; forest and scrub growing faintly discernible. A firefly drifted overhead like a midget flare. Some leaves rustled inexplicably.

You should have gone, his mind said. You're leaving it too late. . . .

There was no question of a gradual thinning-out. The twenty of them stayed together; went together. . . . He fingered his whistle-cord, racked with indecision, his judgment distorted.

Soon, he answered himself. Soon. . . .

The silence was so intense that he could hear his orderly's lips ungum. Something moved on the slope below where he lay; moved and dissolved. The night had played tricks before, over and over, and this was no different. Or was it? He felt Saw Tun Shwe stiffen; noticed him ease his rifle forward. Raw-eyed, he stared but saw nothing; heard only the faulty thunder of his heart. Then, without warning, something moved again and all at once he realized that he was looking at the shadowy form of a crouching man.

He hesitated, his scalp tightening. In quick succession he identified several more figures within thirty yards of the boulders. For what seemed an everlasting moment his brain stalled. He couldn't grasp their reality. Only when Saw Tun Shwe fired did the feeling of paralysis leave him. For a second or two the crouching shapes froze motionless and the bark of the shot sped away into the distance. Then, overlapping the thud of his orderly's rifle-bolt slamming home, a shout came from the slope, barbaric, demoniacal, and the figures rose up and began to move, all pretence ended.

'Banzai!'

Saw Tun Shwe fired again and Gilling fired, too, wildly, emptying his revolver at the oncoming shadows. Some vanished but others came on. One, in the lead, was already thrashing through the bamboo just below the boulders. There was no time for Gilling to reload and he was without a grenade. Wildly, he clutched at the Very pistol stuck in his webbing. The Japanese was close enough for them to hear the fibrous rasp of his breath. As Gilling levelled the short brass barrel he got a frightening glimpse of a lean, star-green face under the soft-peaked cap; bared teeth, a moustache. Then he snatched at the trigger and the man seemed to explode, chest-high, in a shrieking, acetylene-white ball of flame. He plunged backwards, gathering momentum, showering bright, effervescent light in all directions.

Gilling watched his tumbling body in horrified relief. But as his eyes followed the dazzling cocoon's downward progress he saw many more Japanese exposed by its spluttering glare and, quite suddenly, he was conscious that the whole escarpment was loud with firing and savage cries. Until that moment, obsessed with his own danger, he hadn't grasped that the infiltration was widespread. Fumbling, he drew his whistle and sounded three shrill blasts.

A grenade detonated against a tree and the night stabbed red. Metal whip-cracked through the undergrowth.

'Get back,' he bawled into the darkness. 'Get back!'

He sounded his whistle again, then turned and made for the top with Saw Tun Shwe, fear snapping at his heels. The very thing he had dreaded was happening —and he had allowed it to happen.

You fool, his mind screamed. You bloody fool.

CHAPTER EIGHT

His leg kept giving way as he blundered into the cutting. The wounded Karen left by Nay Dun was propped against the bank, head oddly angled, hands to chest as if in agony. Gilling had all but forgotten his existence, but when he stooped to lift him he discovered that the man was no longer alive. He tore the red identity-disc from the bandaged throat, grabbed the discarded rifle, and staggered on.

The road levelled out and he made about fifty yards before the disastrous feeling of panic lost some of its impetus. He went prone beside some scrub, Saw Tun Shwe with him. Spectral figures criss-crossed the direct route from the cutting, running upright, bent low. Unless they came close it was impossible to tell which were Karens; which Japanese. The firing was working over the top of the escarpment and spreading to left and right of the road. A couple of riflemen came sprinting through the scrub and Gilling yelled at them to join him. Moments later the four of them were exchanging shots with a group of Japanese who appeared on the road itself. A grenade fell near and a blast of scarlet shattered the darkness.

'Move!'

They rose to their feet and ran another thirty or forty yards before turning again. It was hopeless to attempt to control the Karens retreating on either side of him. Everywhere the fighting had broken up into fast-moving battles between small parties—chaotic, unco-ordinated. The situation was completely out of hand.

Together they warded off a concerted rush, then pulled still further back. With sinking heart Gilling was beginning to realize that the Japanese weren't content merely with having secured the escarpment: they wanted the town as well. Bandaung itself was valueless, but if they once got the bit between their teeth Gyobin was also at their mercy. The road was as good as theirs if only they knew it. Except for the remnants of Nay Dun's platoon there was nothing to stop them if they chose to go on.

And it was his fault. His fault. . . . The knowledge was at the very centre of his dismay. He must have been blind to have jeopardized everything with so inflexible a bluff.

Stumbling silhouettes came at them, automatics blazing; sheered away. In desperation Gilling parted from the road. They made progress across uneven ground towards some bulbous clumps of trees. There was fighting here, too—scattered stabs of light, cries, the swish of grass and thud of pounding feet. He felt hunted. Everything that moved was suspect; every sound dangerous.

He should have know this would happen. Jesus, he should have known. . . .

Saw Tun Shwe dropped abruptly on to one knee and fired. Well away to their left the night flash-bulbed twice with the hollow crack of grenades.

'Keep going,' he urged.

His right calf-muscle felt as if it were locked in a cramp, but fear negatived the handicap; drove him on. To his surprise he suddenly found himself on the edge of the golf course; passing the eighth tee. Almost with disbelief he saw the sand box and the wooden indicator —8: 394 yards. A kind of madness entered his thoughts and he recalled that the hole was a dog-leg; par five.

Bullets scythed through the plantation of pines bordering the fairway. Slewing round, he shot from the hip at what he took to be a glint of metal; saw a shape waver and sink into the rough.

'Run!'

They kept together, equally spent, heavy-footed. There was a ditch across the fairway and they dropped into it; faced the way they had come, breathing hard. There was no one to be seen, but on the other side of the plantation, nearer the road, a few bursts of fire crackled erratically. Gilling led the three Karens along the ditch. It severed the plantation and twisted out into the open again close to some bunkers. They were on another fairway—the fourth, he remembered—and he could just discern a straggling line of men moving towards them from the direction of the tee. The rifle was empty and he lacked another clip. Crouching, he continued along the ditch, reloading his revolver as he went. The approaching line of Japanese loomed larger, coming at a shambling trot, weapons held awkwardly high. There were about twenty of them and dread contracted Gilling's bowels as one of their number yapped a command. He was in terror of falling into their hands and the almost overpowering temptation was to break cover and run. He could hear the soft pad of their stride; see the sheen of their bayonets. The knowledge of what they could do to him made him cringe against the side of the ditch, but when they were barely a stone's-throw away—just as his self-control was on the point of breaking—they veered off towards the lake.

Numbed, he watched the night swallow them up, then moved on. The hunted feeling was continuous; utterly self-centred. With it was compounded the despair of personal failure, but this reached out beyond

himself and a corner of his mind grew frantic with his responsibility to the division and the need to re-establish some sort of line.

They skirted the bunkers and climbed heavily from the ditch. A path led away from the 'brown' and he followed it without hesitation. Bandaung was on their right: a few roofs showed in the pale star-glimmer. If they kept straight on they would avoid all but the outlying bungalows and then regain the road somewhere beyond the town's northern perimeter. Despite everything his recollection of the area was as accurate as a map—uncannily so—and the past intruded in spasms, overprinting his desperation with delicious, anachronistic touches. Lungs burning, he hobbled at a jog-trot around another sand trap. He had played out of it once and holed from forty yards; the only 'eagle' of his life. He remembered the occasion as a drowning man remembers—automatically, in the space of a gun-flash. Next moment he was crouching behind some bushes, riveted to the present by a sudden exchange of rifle fire at alarmingly close quarters. When it ended there was a murky rush of figures across the path ahead of them, then silence.

He signalled to the Karens to follow him. The path meandered through knee-high grass; joined a cart track. Again his choice of direction was immediate. The track provided a short-cut from the course to the Cottage Hospital and he'd used it a score of times with Ailsa Seymour. He didn't consciously think of her name or appearance; merely that she had been with him—and that beyond the hospital there was a stretch of open woodland across which he could reach the swimming pool. Beyond that again was the P.W.D. bungalow, then the bank's rest house, after which there was the gravel path that would bring them close to the

tiny Protestant cemetery and, eventually, down a wooded slope to the road.

The fighting had reached the beginnings of the town. Outbreaks of firing winked and chattered from half a dozen points roughly abreast of them. For a hundred yards or so their own progress was uninterrupted and Gilling began to think they might have shaken the Japanese off. But as they entered the hospital grounds through a post and rail fence they were shot at from the steps of the main building.

He swerved violently to the left, making for the colony of huts at the hospital's rear. If they had been anywhere else he might have completely lost his head and blundered about like a trapped animal. As it was he knew exactly where to go. They crashed through some flower-beds; past a flag pole set in concrete. A width of lawn separated them from the first of the huts and they were under fire every yard of the way. It seemed a miracle that none of them was hit, but soon they were running between the huts, their boots ringing on the cement pathways. The huts had been freshly earth-oiled and the smell filled his nostrils. With heightened awareness he saw the white boards centred on each doorway—RADIOGRAPHY . . .X-RAY . . . DENTAL DEPARTMENT. . . . And in a moment's fleeting aberration he remembered that the one marked RADIOGRAPHY had been hers.

It was like being guided by a dream. He cut between the last of the huts and zig-zagged to the other side of the grounds, using the vegetable gardens for cover. Once through the fence they struggled towards the thinly wooded slopes that led to the swimming pool.

'Thakin!'

Saw Tun Shwe's warning chilled his skin. Almost before he grasped the reason for it the others had

thrown themselves to the ground and opened fire at an oncoming group of Japanese. They seemed to emerge out of nowhere. There were five of them, close already, hunched over spiked rifles. A couple went down before Gilling got in his first shot but the rest continued to advance, horribly silent, menacing, the long points levelled low. Two more fell, one as though he'd smashed full-tilt into a wall. The last of the five began to scream when he found himself alone, like a man gone berserk. He made a few yards then went sprawling, rolling to within a short distance of where Gilling lay. He was still alive. In the way that a boxer gropes for the ropes he tried to get up, but one of the riflemen jumped forward and bayoneted him through the side. It was all over in a matter of seconds, yet time seemed to stand still while he clawed and thrashed to his death.

'Come on!'

The words choked in Gilling's throat. Near to panic again he stumbled through the trees, aghast at the savagery; selfish in his terror. Spasmodic burst of firing still came from the town but the intervening silences were lengthening and he wondered desperately what was happening—how many Karens remained in the fight; how far the Japanese would push their attack. Somewhere at the back of his mind he was thinking of Church, knowing that he could never justify his failure to make an orderly withdrawal while they'd had the opportunity. He couldn't say: 'I promised Nay Dun half an hour's start and was determined not to lose face.' Yet that was the reason—that, and no other. And, because of it, his feelings for the subedar corroded into extremes of bitterness—even as he ran.

They debouched warily from the trees and passed the plaited screens of the swimming pool; saw the framework of the high board. It didn't look the same

place, somehow. There was an unreal quality about everything he recognized and each mental snapshot of things past seemed to touch his mind with fantasy. They vaulted the fence of the P.W.D. bungalow—he clumsily—and hurried, crouching, across the lawn. There were two cane chairs on the verandah and he recalled having shared a bottle of whisky there with a local mining engineer. Down near the bazaar an exploding grenade lifted a spurt of flame, silhouetting a huddle of buildings, killing the memory stone dead.

'This way,' he whispered hoarsely.

The bank's rest house was next, dark under the whitewashed eaves. As they drew level with its familiar, box-like outline, Saw Tun Shwe grabbed his arm. Instinctively, he froze to a halt, heart thumping. Unseen, an automatic hammered briefly. Peering, he saw a handful of Japanese moving on the slope below them. He waited for them to go by, and all the time it was in his mind that, two years before, he had spent a fortnight in this house; slept there with Ailsa Seymour every night of the second week. But even that seemed utterly unreal—as if it had happened to someone else.

He let the Japanese jog out of sight, then waved the Karens forward. Deep within himself he was trying to hold on to something—something to combat the weakness and despair that were destroying him. But here, among the deserted places of another day, he was clutching at ghosts. There was no comfort in anything he saw or remembered. Nothing could put a stop to the craven feeling of being hunted down, of being borne along on a tide of disaster which his own incompetence had brought about.

They left the rest house behind, stooping as if they were treading through a low tunnel. The running fight seemed to have finally petered out. Bandaung lay silent

under the stars and the only sounds were the scrape of their boots; the rough wheeze of their breathing. Either the Japanese had liquidated most of the scattered opposition or they had decided not to press beyond the town's northern limits. For the time being Gilling could only guess at what had happened, but he would soon know. Already they had struck the gravel path which would bring them near the cemetery and it was only a matter of minutes before the road came into view.

The cemetery showed up earlier than he'd expected and the isolation of the forest-lapped graves filled him with a sudden, elemental fear, underlining the desolation of his own loneliness. He left the path and travelled diagonally across the slope through some thorny scrub. Bandaung was a good half-mile behind them now and the jungle was beginning again. A creeper brushed the rim of his hat and he knocked it away, startled. Pain jarred through his leg with every slight unevenness of the ground but he wasn't conscious of it. His senses were dominated by anxiety to sight the road and he worked cautiously down the tangled gradient, sick with apprehension at what he might find. He could hear nothing to suggest movement along the road and hope flickered. There was a chance, then. Encouraged, he moved nearer, craning for a view. At last he saw it—curling below them, faintly dappled, overhung with trees. It was deserted, but still he wasn't satisfied. He moved nearer, head cocked, looking left and right. For fully a minute he waited, distrustful of what he saw, listening uneasily. But nothing stirred, nothing pierced the tinny insect-scratch of the surrounding jungle, and eventually he slid down the bank to the road itself.

The accumulation of shock and relief was only now beginning to take effect. Nausea fluttered through his

exhaustion and his teeth chattered. He glanced up at the Karens on the bank above him and heard himself say: 'It's all clear. Come on down.'

The rifle was still slung from his shoulder and Saw Tun Shwe took it from him. 'We were lucky, thakin.'

Chest heaving, Gilling spat. 'Let's hope the others were, too.'

They started along the road. It was over two miles to the rendezvous and Gilling fretted, wondering how many had managed to find their way to safety. He dared not be too optimistic: nor could he fool himself about the future. They'd been reprieved: no more. Even if everyone got back the inevitable was merely delayed. They'd never hold the road now.

They saw nobody, ahead or behind, and he thought: We're the only ones. The rest have had it. . . . Then, leadenly: It should never have happened. Never. . . .

He limped on, sinking into wretchedness. His leg was on fire and his mind seemed filled with grey mud. Near the third milestone someone moved in the shadows.

'Halt!'

Gilling had been expecting the challenge but even so his heart skipped a beat. He swayed to a standstill and licked his lips.

'Friend.' He repeated it. 'Friend.'

A stocky figure stepped into the starlight, cradling an automatic. It was Nay Dun.

'Advance, friend, and be recognized.'

Infuriated by the subedar's slavish adherence to the book, Gilling flared: 'Cut that out, subedar. This isn't the parade ground.' But as he went forward the feeling grew in him that he was approaching his superior, coming in disgrace to account for the failure of the responsibility with which he had been charged.

CHAPTER NINE

He said: 'How many have got here?'

'Fourteen, so far.'

'Fourteen?' He echoed it in wonder. It seemed impossible.

Nay Dun pecked a nod. 'Three are still unaccounted for.'

'More, surely? Six or sev—'

'Three, thakin. The others are known to have been killed.' Some names were rattled off, Jemadar Saw Bwe's among them.

'Saw Bwe?'

'Yes. In the town, outside the Bioscope Hall.'

Gilling swallowed. 'That's definite, is it?'

'Yes, thakin.' The subedar's voice was as emotionless as a stock-taker's. He paused briefly. 'I left one wounded man in the cutting as instructed—Rifleman Aung Win.'

'He was dead,' Gilling said woodenly. 'Saw Tun Shwe's got his rifle.'

He looked anxiously along the road but saw no one; heard nothing. The pain in his leg was spreading into his groin and a muscle was jumping in his back as if it had taken on an independent existence.

'They were all over us.' He spoke as though some sort of explanation were expected of him. 'Everywhere—without warning. We hadn't a chance.' In the shadows on either side of the road he picked out the recumbent forms of the wounded. 'What's our strength amount to?'

'Fighting strength, twenty-five. Eleven wounded. Mules and cooks.'

Wearily, Gilling juggled with the figures. They were better than his wildest hope but they gave no satisfaction. The sense of doom had burrowed deep into his spirit.

'And three missing—is that it?'

'Two, thakin.'

'You said three.'

'I was counting Aung Win.'

Gilling wheeled, glaring. 'Did you suppose I'd left him?'

Nay Dun said nothing. A firefly pulsed on and off.

'Did you, subedar? Is that what you were thinking?'

'No, thakin.'

Trembling, Gilling willed Nay Dun to turn his head. A long time seemed to pass. The night creaked around them. Then, softly, vehemently, between clenched teeth, he said in English: 'You're a damned liar.'

He turned away, filled with a murderous rage. *Bastard*, he fumed. *You bastard*. . . . Without reason he limped along the road until he found himself with the mules, then retraced his steps. The wounded lay in the dark places under the bank and he saw the whites of their eyes as some of them watched him pass; heard a groan. Despair slowly blunted the savage hurt and the feeling of hopelessness prickled through. He went back to Nay Dun; addressed him grudgingly.

'We can't afford to wait. Our only chance is to get behind the last demolition as soon as possible. For all we know the Japs are merely taking a breather. It's about six miles. If the men not accounted for are still on the move they can find us there. There's no other way for them to go.'

Nay Dun nodded. His demeanour was completely unchanged. The flesh of his cheeks quivered as he brought his heels together.

'We start now?'

'Yes,' Gilling said. 'Right away. One of your sections can cover us.'

They went slowly, bearing the worst of the wounded on stretchers which Nay Dun had had fashioned out of baggage ropes and lopped bamboos. They followed the mules in silence, dragging their feet in the dust, and Gilling worked up and down the straggling column urging the men to keep together. Sometimes the road corkscrewed through thick forest and the darkness almost blinded them. Sometimes there was nothing between them and the stars and Gilling could see the blank look of exhaustion on the Karens' faces as they laboured by. More than once he joined the rear-guard occasionally pausing to listen and stare in the direction of Bandaung. Gradually he came to accept the absence of pursuit and his nerves quietened. But he was utterly without any sense of deliverance. Violence was stamped heavily into his mind and he sweated coldly as he marched, reliving the pattern of their scrambling flight from the escarpment, knowing how perilously close he had come to breaking-point. In every fibre of his being he longed to be free from fear and responsibility. Deep down, under the layers of weariness and pain and shock gone stale, a part of him was crying for an end to the battle. He wanted nothing more than to curl up somewhere and sleep; to hide himself away and escape the insistent pressures that threatened his annihilation.

Desperately he sought to get a grip on himself—trying to plan, to think ahead. But he was steeped in defeat and searched in vain for any gleam of hope. To-

morrow was a distant shore; the plains too remote even to contemplate. Long before dawn they would be at bay, condemned to await the next onslaught. With smarting eyes he stared at the jungle; watched the mask-like features of the Karens as they lurched past. Even the moans of the wounded seemed to express an alien kind of suffering. He felt his loneliness intensify; a little more of his will disintegrate as he recalled the isolation of the handful of gravestones on the edge of the forsaken town.

They went on. After a while the column concertinaed to a halt, the men barging into one another like shunted wagons. Going forward to where the mules were, Gilling spoke to the naik who commanded what was left of Saw Bwe's platoon.

'What's the trouble?' He failed to recognize that the naik was smiling.

'Look, thakin.'

He did as he was asked, peering as though he had just been roused from sleep. And to his amazement he found himself staring at a bus.

He couldn't believe his eyes. Deep in shade the bus stood askew on the narrow ledge of road, front wheels close to the drop. It was about fifty yards away, low-slung, looking not unlike a huge buffalo. Stupefied, he continued to stare, and for the first time in days something like cautious excitement possessed him. He limped towards it, a dozen questions jamming his mind. Broken down? Out of petrol? He dared not even begin to hope that it had been abandoned as a gift, in running order. On a board across the top of the cab, crudely lettered in Burmese, he saw: THE GOLDEN PEACOCK, beneath which was: GYOBIN—BANDAUNG—THAYEMYO. Advertisements were daubed along the side

nearest to him—TIGER BALM . . . LOTUS BEER. The cab door wouldn't open, so he walked round to the one at the rear, noting on the way that the tyres were sound and the ramshackle vehicle reasonably level on its springs. The clinging smell of betel-nut and sun-dried fish assailed him as he clambered inside and clanked along the bare metal floor. As far as he could tell the interior was quite empty and he could just discern slatted benches running from end to end under the square, glass-less windows.

He lit a match when he got to the driving-seat. As it flared his eyes searched the dented fascia and almost the first thing he saw was a small brass Buddha dangling on a chain from the ignition key. Incredulously, he switched on; tried to read the petrol gauge. But the match was burning his fingers and he had to wait until he had struck another.

Empty. . . . The wild optimism shrivelled and he felt a pang of dismay, as if he had been defrauded. Simultaneously, through the cab window, Saw Tun Shwe spoke to him.

'Will it go, thakin?'

'There's no petrol.' He slumped into the seat and lit a third match. There was a hole where one of the dials should have been; some broken wires. None of the others registered. On the floor to his left, amongst a litter of cheroot-stubs, he noticed the starting-handle. Without hope he picked it up and passed it out to his orderly.

'D'you know what to do?'

Saw Tun Shwe nodded and moved to the front of the bull-nosed bonnet; rattled the handle home. Gilling settled himself at the wheel. In neutral, the gear-shift wobbled like a metronome and the wheel had about a forty-degree play on it.

'Right!' he called, reaching for the choke.

Saw Tun Shwe swung the handle. The engine was heavy and the bus creaked on its springs. Three times the Karen grunted and strained without result. Another man ran forward and joined him but Gilling felt no answering kick. Two or three minutes passed, and still nothing happened.

It's no good, he thought dejectedly. I should have guessed as much. We're wasting our time. . . . But something made him say: 'Just once more.'

With disbelief he heard the engine fire; felt the floor-boards rattle under his feet. He cried out exultantly, pressing the accelerator to the boards, producing a roar that matched his own jubilant astonishment. For more time than he realized he sat in the darkness, adjusting the engine's running speed, feeling the wheel shudder wonderfully in his hands. It was beyond his comprehension how the bus came to be there, but it wasn't the moment for speculation. His spirits soared. By some inexplicable freak of fate it was suddenly possible to get the wounded safely back to Gyobin. All at once he could make contact with the main forces, replenish his dwindling ammunition—be reinforced, even.

His fatigue seemed to fade. He left the engine running and made his way out on to the road. Nay Dun was there. Eagerly, without antagonism, Gilling asked him: 'Who've we got left who can drive?'

'Mya Lwin, thakin.'

'Get him for me.' When the rifleman arrived, Gilling said: 'What have you driven before?'

'Three-tonners.'

'For how long?'

'A month, thakin.'

Nay Dun explained: 'He was once with head-

quarters company. Two years ago.' It wasn't very encouraging.

'There's no one else?'

'No.'

Gilling hesitated, stroking his beard-stubble. For a few seconds he was tempted to take the bus down to Gyobin himself. He could be there in well under the hour; back again in less than two. . . . It was a heady thought, but even as he toyed with it he knew he had no choice but to stay with the company. All else apart, he was the only person capable of blowing the road.

He said to the rifleman: 'Are you sure you can manage it?'

'I think so, thakin.'

There was no time to be lost. 'Listen.' He spoke slowly, simply, anxious not to confuse. 'You're to drive the casualties to Gyobin—understand? I'll give you a chit to the senior officer there. Find him without delay. Don't let anyone side-track you. I want you back at the tenth milestone before midnight. That's the only thing you've got to remember—midnight. The rest will be in the chit—what you bring; who you bring. The officer will know what to do. Is that clear?'

'Clear, thakin.'

Nay Dun had produced a message-pad. 'Later,' Gilling said. 'I'll turn the thing round first.'

He didn't trust the rifleman's ability on so narrow a road. He pulled himself up into the back of the bus and made his way to the driving-seat. Fumbling, he got one headlamp to work. It threw a pale yellow beam over a group of Karens gathered beyond the bonnet; dimly exposed the mules and wounded in the background. Swiftly, he familiarized himself with the gear positions; found reverse and eased the hand-brake off. The bus had hardly moved before he felt it grate against

the high bank behind. He crunched into bottom and edged forward, pulling the wheel round for all he was worth.

'Ho! . . . Ho!' On the open side of the road Saw Tun Shwe signalled urgently.

Gilling leaned out of the window. 'Can't I come any further?'

'No more, thakin.'

God, he thought. I scarcely moved it. . . . He climbed out of the bus again and had a look for himself. It was a tighter fit than he'd imagined. There weren't more than six or seven feet to play with. In other circumstances he would have driven slowly towards Bandaung; found a more suitable spot in which to turn. But with things as they were he dared not. His nerves were playing him up again and he thought of the noise, the lights. At least ten minutes had elapsed since he first saw the bus and he wondered whether the Japanese had started after them.

'Subedar—go and check that the rear-guard's got the road properly covered.'

He returned to the wheel and went into reverse. He was sweating now. The back of the bus ground against the bank almost at once. Dust swirled. The roar of the engine seemed to be filling the forest. He rocked the bus against the bank, dragging the wheel over, then thudded into bottom and crawled forward, alternately dabbing accelerator and brake.

'Ho, thakin! . . . *Ho!*'

The drop in front was practically sheer. He reversed away from it, struggling with the wheel, and juddered against the bank. The nose hadn't come round by more than about five degrees and he began to despair. He headed carefully out towards the edge, braked, crashed into reverse and thudded back as far as he could go. A

dozen times he did it, sweat pouring from him as he fought with the heavy wheel, pain shooting through his right leg. And at the end of it all he wasn't even broadside across the road.

Grimly, he paused before trying again, coughing dust. More and more he was growing agitated about the Japanese. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw that Nay Dun had returned and was watching him. He went into gear again. His touch was heavy and the bus lurched away from the bank faster than he'd intended. He braked hard, hand and foot, but his boot slipped off the worn cap of the pedal and hit the accelerator. All of what was left of his strength went in desperation on to the hand-brake—but too late. He saw his orderly jump clear; felt the thud as the front wheels went out into space and the underside ploughed over the verge. The back end tipped up and for one awful moment he thought the bus was going all the way into the darkness below. But the forward motion suddenly stopped. He cut the engine and the silence was filled with the gritty sound of numerous small objects slithering from one end of the floor to the other.

In panic he struggled to the rear; dropped with a sickening jar to the road.

'Ropes!' he bawled. 'Baggage ropes!'

He was too startled to believe that nothing could be done. As though bereft of his senses he stared, listening to the soft dribbling of earth. Along the road behind him there was an urgent hubbub of voices; the whinnying movement of mules. Then the bus started to slide. It went slowly at first, smoothly, like a boat leaving a slipway. Insects jazzed mildly in the tilting beam of the solitary headlamp. Transfixed, Gilling watched helplessly as the vehicle gathered momentum and started crashing through the undergrowth. Seconds

later it was lost to sight and there was only the diminishing noise of its hurtling descent.

Then, abruptly, that, too, ended. A mocking quiet settled over the forest. And Gilling stood alone on the empty road, beating his fists in anguish against his temples.

Part Three

THE VILLAGE

CHAPTER ONE

How long he remained there he never knew. The world was about his ears. But at last, with a fury born of heartache, he ordered the company on. In dumb obedience the men formed column, lifted the wounded and continued their ragged march. Their leaden acceptance of disaster was typical, but as his dismay found coherence he couldn't face them without shame. In all their time together there had been nothing as devastatingly cruel as this; never a period when the knowledge of personal failure was so overwhelming. And he willed upon himself the imagined indictment of the wounded, sharing with them the bleak despair that slip-second's clumsiness had made out of hope and elation.

Bewildered, his mind re-enacted the moment of catastrophe. Saw Tun Shwe walked at his side, loyally offering an explanation. 'The road was all ploughed up, thakin. The driver had tried to turn himself—but could not. There were many tyre-marks in the dust before you started.' Taking two steps to his one, the small Karen went on: 'He must have met people moving out of Bandaung and been frightened to go on into the town. That is why the bus was there, thakin.' But Gilling wasn't listening. He was tortured by what he had done; with what might have been. He'd said: 'Who've we got left who can drive?' and the irony of the question taunted him, as did his careful instructions to the rifleman whose skill he'd doubted. Gyobin was as remote as before; all prospect of reinforcement utterly destroyed. Why? Because of him. The thought

ran wild, like a phrase repeated in a fever. Because of him. Because of him. . . . They were back where they had been half an hour earlier—except that now the reality was embittered by a dream that had been brutally snatched away.

He stayed just ahead of the rear-guard, hearing the rhythmless drag of moving feet, gazing vacantly at the swaying bulk of the column on the shadowy road. After a while, Nay Dun, who was somewhere up in front, stepped aside from the line of march and waited until he came level.

'One of the mules is lame, thakin.'

Gilling nodded, brushing the news aside. The unused message-pad protruded from the subedar's webbing and to Gilling its continued prominence implied a deliberately sustained censure. Reaction smarted through the stranglehold of humiliation. 'Why not say what you're thinking, subedar? Why not get it off your chest?'—but he swallowed the words back before they reached his lips. Nay Dun quickened his pace and went forward again, his short stride as tireless as ever, and, watching him draw away, Gilling thought sullenly: You won't be happy until this company's yours, will you?

With all his heart he began to wish for one last opportunity to prove himself; one chance to act strongly and decisively before it was too late and what was left of his pride was finally spent. He held to the wish with smouldering hostility. But as he thought of the Japanese and pictured what was to come, he found his defiance crumbling before the returning probes of fear. And, cowering, his mind asked Nay Dun: What d'you expect of me? What is it you want?

The road started to twist and switchback. It still bore northwards; still ran roughly parallel with the

main L of C. Under the ice-blue stars the hills humped darkly on all sides, like overgrown slag-heaps, and every mile seemed longer, more intolerable, than the last. A few of the men began to straggle, and the rear-guard—exhausted themselves—trapped them as they fell back; herded them on. Twice Gilling ordered a halt. Now and again Nay Dun stalked back and forth along the column's length, chivvying, swearing, grabbing at an arm, slapping a shoulder. Steam rose from the labouring ranks and the stench of sweat hung strongly under the trees. Where the dust lay thin the *clop* of the mules' tread sounded clearly above the whispering of the forest and the jiggle of harnesses and the monotonous scrape of barely-lifted boots.

The wounded sagged in their improvised stretchers and those who carried them would once in a while dispense what comfort there was in a tepid water-bottle. The first man died before they had marched for an hour; the second a mile later. On each occasion Nay Dun came back to report, and Gilling, growing insensitive under the bludgeoning of pain and bone-aching fatigue, no longer read an accusation into the subedar's gruff announcement.

There was a noise in his ears as if shells were cupped against them and for quite long stretches at a time he plodded along with his eyes closed. An elephant trumpeted shrilly from a cavernous slope, bristling his neck-hair, but for the most part he was imprisoned within himself. Without his knowing, a star fell brilliantly across the gauzy blur of the Milky Way; fireflies floated in the lofty cathedrals of the forest. He had an awareness of futility, of failure, of impending dread; nothing was clear-cut, nothing dominant. Habit propelled him. By the time they passed the ninth milestone he was moving like a drunkard. Another of the

wounded had died by then and the lame mule was lagging badly. He heard Nay Dun encouraging the men; bullying, cajoling—and once, quite clearly, he heard his own voice.

'Bastard,' it said quietly; savagely.

It took them forty minutes to cover the last mile. Gilling would have passed the stone but for Nay Dun bringing the company to a standstill. Unsteadily, he lit a match and squinted at the sodden plan which Church had given him. They were on a curving shelf under a high wall of rock and the road was mined with five linked charges. While the column moved clear he searched for, and found, the buried leads. Normally he had to steel himself to work with explosives, but he was so utterly spent that he approached the fuse-assembly with almost careless indifference. Secretly, his nerves made him awkward, but even when the detonators rattled against his teeth as he crimped them tight he wasn't consciously alarmed. It was for all the world as if he were operating in his sleep.

He lit the fuse-ends; hobbled away. Two minutes later the starlight was obliterated by a shuddering gash of flame. Boiling clouds of dust spurted from the wall of rock and the blast followed with the stunning roar of a breaking wave. He waited a little while, then got up and went closer. Grit was still filtering down but he could see that about thirty yards of the shelf had completely disappeared. And, quite without feeling, he knew how useless it was going to be.

CHAPTER TWO

ARBITRARILY, without making a reconnaissance, he sited the platoons from the road, pointing out the general area each was to occupy. He had neither the strength nor the will to do more.

'Four men on watch, subedar—an hour at a time. Arrange it so that the Bren in your platoon is continuously manned.' He couldn't believe they would be spared for long, but this was the most his mind could do. With difficulty he saw that it was coming up to midnight. 'You and I'll take turns—a couple of hours each.'

Ramrod-straight, the subedar nodded. 'Where will you be?'

'Here,' Gilling said. 'Beside the road.' He was ready to drop, but the assumption provoked him. Out of enmity he said: 'I'll do the first stint.'

Nay Dun looked at him sharply.

'Get some rest,' Gilling countered, 'while you can.'

He turned away, senselessly committed, small-minded in his determination not to yield. Nay Dun seemed to hesitate before striding off and Gilling waited until he had gone before moving. The stars blinked down and the scratchy hum of the jungle filled his ears. An occasional rustle indicated that the platoons were struggling into position through the steep undergrowth. From somewhere in the rear there came the nasal sobbing of a mule.

'You, too,' he said to Saw Tun Shwe, gesturing. 'Get some sleep.'

Alone on the road, he limped to the lip of the cratered shelf before returning to the shadows. He knew that if he once sat down he would lose consciousness. Black clouds fogged his brain, disarming his nerves, imbuing him with fatalism. If they came, they came. A battalion might hold them, but not twenty-five men. He could reconnoitre all night, site every man personally, bind the cross-fire together, indulge every tactical ploy—and the result would be the same. They would come when it suited them; blast their way through or find a way round. . . .

Stupefied into indifference he groped about the hillside until he located the men on watch. He stayed a minute or two with each of them, staring in silence at the mottled curve beyond the broken length of road. Even under the dead-weight of exhaustion he knew his supervision to be farcical. Since the bus went over the edge he had forfeited all claim to their respect. He was a civilian wearing the wrong clothes and every one of them must have seen through the charade by now.

A bruised-looking moon rose just before one and was greeted by eerie cries from the deep recesses of the hills. In an effort to keep awake he counted to a hundred, then towards a thousand, but somewhere near half-way he lost track and gave up. The time dragged by, harnessed to a snail. He walked back to where the wounded lay among the rice sacks and ammunition boxes. Nearby, like bas-reliefs, the mules stood darkly against some phosphorescent moss on the bank: the cooks slept. The wounded were as silent as the dead, their faces hard and drawn with suffering, but he could only tell which were which because the living sweated.

Their plight wrung his heart and eventually he could look at them no more. He went forward again,

unsteady on his legs, the revived sense of guilt wilting. Every part of him seemed to be on fire; throbbing. It was as if gravity were pulling at his eyelids; salt under them. At two o'clock he roused Nay Dun. There should have been satisfaction in his slurred 'You can take over now, subedar'—but he was quite beyond its reach. He returned to his chosen place at the roadside and lay down, plummeting through a trap-door into sleep the moment his body slumped to the ground.

He dreamed.

Church was there immediately, Church and Crawford, under the gold-mohur tree by the shabby pagoda, and Church was saying: 'You really needed another company, Tony. You'll never do the job properly with what you've got.' Eagerly, he broke in. 'Can I have Abbott?' and Church was about to agree when Crawford interrupted. 'Abbott's running a bonus scheme, sir. So much a head. It's a private hate arrangement. I don't think it would fit in with Tony's way of working, do you?' And Church reflected: 'Maybe not. Perhaps you'd best tackle it yourself after all, Tony. On second thoughts I can't spare anyone. I've more than enough on my own plate.' In the dream he felt no dismay. But for some reason, instead of saluting, he found himself shaking hands. And, when he looked at Church he saw, quite without surprise, that his wife was beside him. 'Good luck, Tony,' she smiled sadly. 'Give our love to Bandaung.'

The scene faded; gave way to another. There was no chronological pattern. He danced with Ailsa in the bright, artificial lounge of the Bandaung Club and the radio-gramophone was playing 'Deep Purple'. Earlier (he knew) they'd listened to the news of the German invasion of Norway and now, her body soft against his,

she asked: 'Does it all seem utterly remote to you, somehow?—almost impossible to grasp?' He nodded, his temple nestling her red hair. She was wearing an emerald-green dress and her shoulders were very white against the colour. 'It'll spread, won't it, Tony?' to which he said: 'It's bound to. We'll all be in it one day, I suppose.' She raised her eyes as he turned her under the fans. 'Even here?' He shrugged. 'Perhaps not here exactly—not in Bandaung—but it'll spread all right. They've chucked a pretty big stone into the pond this time.'

There was a gap then, a kaleidoscope of shifting lights and hollow-sounding voices, during which he was somehow able to wonder what had become of her. Then the voices died away and all the lights became one. He sensed the weight of the Very pistol in his hand; saw the Japanese explode in a greenish froth of flame. Fear entered his stomach and he started to run—but soon it wasn't him running. It was Rance—long-legged, canted forward, making for the culvert. 'No!' he cried, but Rance didn't hear; didn't know what was going to happen. He saw him fall; saw the posse of Japanese drag him out of sight behind the block—and in the dream shut his eyes.

The fear grew, and there was loneliness with it. 'Ailsa,' he was whispering. 'Ailsa.' There was a light beside the bed and he switched it off as he rolled towards her—but the moment fragmented. He was still lying prone but the darkness was there because he was blindfolded, learning to strip a Bren by touch, and the weapon-training sergeant at O.C.T.U. was bawling derisively: 'Call yourself a soldier, Mr. Gilling? . . . Now start again—right back at the bloody beginning.' A procession of faces followed, chanting it as they passed, and all the while he struggled with the Bren, dis-

tressed and panicky because of his incompetence. Church's face was there, and Crawford's, and many others. 'Call yourself a soldier, Mr. Gilling'—the language had changed to Burmese; the voice to Nay Dun's. And suddenly all the faces belonged to Karens and the chanting had become an indecipherable whimpering because of what the Japanese had done to their mouths. . . .

He twisted in his sleep, groaning, but the dream insisted. Somehow he escaped from the sequence to find himself at home, walking towards the old, red-brick library. His father was standing on the wide, white steps, talking to someone he didn't recognize, and the stranger was saying: 'Any news of Tony recently?' His father had his back to him. 'Not since the balloon went up.' As he drew nearer the other man said, 'Burma, isn't it?' and his father nodded. 'He was getting pretty frustrated . . . feeling out of it—you know what young men are. In several recent letters he's complained of playing at soldiers while everyone else is mixed up in the real thing. It's natural enough. I expect he's relieved in a way; glad to be showing his mettle. . . .' He called to them, hurrying still closer: 'It isn't like that at all'—but they didn't see him. He might not have been there. The two of them went up the steps together, still talking, and the door closed in his face. In despair he beat his fists against it. 'You don't understand,' he shouted. 'You don't know what you're saying'—and the sound of his fists became a machine-gun's drumming.

There was another gap then, another swirl of lights, before the dream evolved. He sat on the crest of the South Downs with Ailsa, looking at the town below, and she remarked: 'It's almost like Bandaung, isn't it?' And it was; it was. Then the rain came, sweet and

cool on his skin. It moved across the Weald like a smoke-screen and the gentle distances were gradually blotted out. The gate on the nearby slope became the road-block; a discarded hat on the upright, Rance's head. His intestines seemed to melt away as he put his binoculars on to it and saw the fish-slab gaze of Rance's eyes, the trim moustache on the upper lip, the gleam of his bared teeth. 'Oh Christ,' he thought. 'Oh Jesus Christ.' The picture hazed out of focus and the next thing he knew was that Nay Dun had moved between him and the block, holding something in his hands; proffering it. In terror he asked: 'What's this for?' and the subedar said: 'For strength, thakin. For you.' And all at once it wasn't a monkey any more; nor was it Nay Dun, but a Japanese. 'For you. It's for you. . . .'

He was awake, though for a moment he couldn't accept it. 'Take it away,' he mouthed, recoiling in horror from the face etched against the stars above him. 'Take it away.' The face solidified; took on flesh. Then he heard the subedar speak, no longer as if in an echo-chamber, and with a trembling start he knew that the nightmare had at last gone out of him.

'Thakin,' Nay Dun was whispering urgently. '*Thakin.*'

CHAPTER THREE

He jerked on to one elbow. Pain and fatigue throbbed into his consciousness but alarm pushed them back; held them at a distance. There was a peculiar tightness in his chest, as though it were banded with something cold.

'By the demolition,' Nay Dun breathed.

Water sloshed in the bottle on Gilling's hip as he rolled over. Shadow and moonlight apart he could see nothing. Dry-mouthed, he said: 'You're sure?'

The query was ignored. 'Scouts, I think. A patrol.'

'I don't see them.'

'Near the milestone.' Nay Dun used his head as a pointer. 'Where the bamboo clump leans over.'

'Now?'

'Yes, now.'

Vainly, Gilling strained his eyes. 'How many?' The dream had gone but not the fear. It was dribbling through him like melting ice.

'Six.'

Their whispers had wakened Saw Tun Shwe. Seeing him stir, Gilling ordered him to alert the company, but the subedar shook his head. 'There is no need.' He spoke to Saw Tun Shwe direct. 'It is done.'

Resentfully, Gilling muttered: 'I'm not dead yet, subedar.' Again, without success, he searched the locality of the bamboos. 'How long since you noticed them?'

'A few minutes. They came to the edge of the gap, then went back to where they are now.' Nay Dun

paused. Then, suddenly, as if to test him: 'One of them moved—see?'

'Yes,' Gilling lied.

The milestone was less than a hundred yards from where he lay—seventy-five at most. He didn't need to distinguish them to sense their proximity, yet failure to do so gave his imagination rein; worsened his nerves. To have them close again was inevitable, but he was no longer reduced by exhaustion to suicidal indifference. Sleep had given him a fresh lease of dread.

He glanced quickly at his watch and, with disbelief, saw that it was only three-fifteen.

'Now they are all moving,' Nay Dun said, twisting the knife in the wound. 'Together.'

For half a minute Gilling believed he glimpsed them, shadows among shadows, then realized he was mistaken. His mind was brittle; rigid with apprehension yet smarting under the subedar's commentary. 'Where?' he wanted to ask. 'Which way?' But, since he dared not, he worked it out for himself. There were only two courses open to the patrol—to come forward or to go back. Back, then. They had done their job; located the demolition and studied its extent. A six-man patrol wouldn't attack. They would withdraw to the main body and report. And at dawn. . . .

Nay Dun seemed to read his thoughts. In a low voice, he said: 'They will be looking for another route.'

'Or going back,' Gilling ventured

'Not until they have found something better.'

The road pointed away from the company's front in a gentle curve. To its left was a deep chasm; to its right the upward sweep of the hill-side, fuzzy in the moonlight.

'There's always a way round if you go far enough,'

Gilling countered. He was growing wrathful, believing himself played with, cat-and-mouse.

The subedar craned his head, apparently watching the Japanese out of sight. 'There is no need for them to go far.'

'What d'you mean?'

'They can get behind us along the path through the village.'

Gilling's nostrils flared, 'What village?' he said, but even as alarm forced the question out of him he knew that the admission left him wide open to the subedar's scorn. His blindness he could lie about—but not his failure to reconnoitre the company's position. 'What village?'

'Above us on the right. Below the crest of the slope.'

Gilling closed his eyes, as if in defence against the surge of impotent rage that welled through him. Vaguely, he remembered having seen a village marked last time he had looked at the map. To anyone else he could have said: 'I was done in when I did my stint. It was about all I could do to keep awake, even.' Layers deep, the yearning to say it was there, crying weakly like a child in the night. With anyone else exhaustion would have been a bond, but Nay Dun's inflexible expression conveyed only contempt and all Gilling could do was to hate him more.

The subedar went on: 'The path south from the village goes over the other side of the hill.'

'To the road?'

'I did not follow it, but I expect so.'

'And behind us?'

'There was no time to find out.'

Something wailed in the forest like a banshee. The fire-flies switched casually on and off. Gilling looked right, but the overgrown slopes where the Karens lay

hidden prevented him from seeing the hill-side's true crest. Thought required an enormous effort, but the dangers were obvious enough. He could picture the patrol's wary, crouching tread; sense the evil of them. Fear had been a simple thing once, no matter how terrible. So had the shame of showing it. But under Nay Dun's unflagging watch both had progressively lost their shape since Rance was killed. What burrowed into him now was hydra-headed—imagination and despair, personal isolation and pain, failure and weariness, all gnawing at the flimsy shreds of his will along with dread itself. And there was no weapon to fight them with except hatred. He had nothing else left.

The subedar was saying: 'If they find the path it will be too late.'

The authority in his tone raked the smouldering fires of Gilling's antagonism. His left eye was twitching again. Stubbornly, despite his mounting concern, he thought: Don't tell me what to do. . . .

'In daylight,' Nay Dun continued, head close to his, 'we might deny the path for a time—but not if they come in strength before then. And they will if they know it is there.'

The logic was undeniable. Daylight was the company's last ally, yet there was something like a two and a half hour wait until dawn.

Gilling's whisper had grown harsh. 'Cut them off, then. Ambush them.'

'Thakin?'

'Stop them getting back to report. . . . Take a section, subedar. Keep to the path both ways, in and out.' Nay Dun was already slithering away. 'I'll see that everyone's warned.'

Get yourself killed, a part of his mind said.

He sent Saw Tun Shwe to inform the others, then climbed up to the village. It was easy enough to find. A dozen or so deserted huts stood on a sloping tongue of bare hill-side under the wooded crest. Nay Dun had gone through by the time he got there. Moonlight invested the tatty thatch with a false splendour. He moved across the worn spaces between the stilt-legged huts until he reached the point where the clearing funnelled away into the trees. Bitterness possessed him as he confirmed the subedar's tactical diagnosis—bitterness against those responsible for siting the demolition charges with such blatant lack of skill.

Aloud, clenching his hands, he groaned: 'You bloody, bloody fools.'

He remained on the edge of the clearing, sweating from the exertion of the climb, light-headed from lack of food. Below, left, the motionless ocean of hills dipped and tossed all the way to the star-decked wheel of the horizon. Behind, the village had the loneliness of an empty morgue. Saw Tun Shwe joined him after a while and Gilling sent him back with instructions to bring up one of the Bren-gun crews to cover the path. When they came, panting under the weight of the heavy weapon, he positioned them between the piles of the southernmost hut, among chips of firewood and stale pig-droppings, and settled down to wait for them.

His watch showed three thirty-five. A pulse seemed to be beating directly behind his eyes and the moonlight throbbed in unison. A rat scuttled across the bamboo floor above their heads, the sudden sound emphasizing the silence: the Bren-gunner muttered something to his companion. Gilling didn't catch what was said, but once again he wondered what went on in the minds and hearts of these small, impassive men.

Surely they realized the futility of what they were doing?—the hopeless inadequacy of it all? . . . They were still a mystery to him, as alien now as during his first day with them on the clay parade-ground at the barracks. They had marched and fought and suffered together but they were still strangers. Death was their ultimate common denominator, yet even in that they were segregated. He was reminded of this when an orderly touched his arm.

'Yes?'

'The men who have died, thakin—'

'What about them?' Nerves made him curt.

Saw Tun Shwe pointed to another part of the clearing and Gilling saw the tall bamboo tables raised against the sky on which food and drink were offered to placate the spirit gods.

'If there is time,' his orderly said, 'it would be good to bring them here.'

Gilling nodded. 'We'll see.' He was keyed-up in anticipation of Nay Dun's clash with the patrol, but the suggestion struck a spark of feeling in him. For the briefest of moments he understood. Then the understanding shaded into envy, the envy into fear and all the old desolations of loneliness. He looked once more at the spindly pagan altars. A chill shivered along his spine and his mind turned in anguish to the open spaces of the plain and the battalion and the lost comradeship of Church and Abbott and Crawford and the rest. 'We'll see,' he said.

His words cued-in the first burst of firing. It came to them briskly on the night air, like a crackling of burning twigs. At first he thought it was close, just beyond the crest, but when it sounded again he knew he was mistaken. Half a mile; perhaps more. . . . The four of them lay under the floor of the hut, scarcely breathing,

their eyes screwed a little, like men listening to a conversation on a bad line. For minutes on end, while the irregular crackling continued, none of them moved. Then, eventually, they came to realize that it was over; the silence broken and lasting. The Bren-gunner hissed air through his teeth in a nervous release of tension. They glanced at one another, shifted uneasily, licked the sweat-caked dust from their lips. There was some waiting to be lived through before they knew what had happened.

The hands of Gilling's watch dragged round. Three forty-five. . . . Three fifty. . . . Nothing showed on the path out of the dark cave of the forest. The moon floated a fraction higher; the pale shadows of the hut inched across the ground. Three fifty-five. . . . The tension was building up again. Every sound was suspect. Then the Bren-gunner stiffened; raised the butt into his shoulder and squeezed his cheek against the wood. An instant later Gilling saw what he had seen—a handful of figures issuing from the trees in single file—but it was a second or two before he identified the distinctive brims of their hats and knew them to be Karens.

Nay Dun was in the lead—compact, arrogant with success, approaching with the bent-kneed stride of the hillman. Saw Tun Shwe exclaimed quietly: 'The subedar, thakin.' There was an intensity of awe and relief in his voice which Gilling had never noticed before, and jealously he asked himself what manner of soldier he was pitted against—whom battle and stress had somehow ennobled even in the eyes of men not given to adulation.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE section had wiped out the patrol without loss to themselves. 'We caught them on the road as they came past,' Nay Dun reported. 'They saw us at the last moment and scattered—otherwise it would have been over sooner.'

'The path does join the road then?'

'Three-quarters of a mile from here. We camouflaged the junction as best we could and moved the bodies.'

Saw Tun Shwe and the Bren-gun crew were mingling with the other Karens, examining curiously the captured weapons and accoutrements—rifles, automatics, stick-grenades, a canvas satchel and an N.C.O.'s collar-badge. The section-naik removed his hat and flopped a Japanese peaked cap on to his head. He bared his teeth in mock ferocity and the rest of them sniggered childishly, elated by their triumph.

Nay Dun snapped at them. His authority had never seemed more marked. To Gilling he continued: 'Even so the path will be easily found. They are bound to strike it once they start working up the hill-side—which is what they will do. They cannot hope to cross the demolition.' He rammed his fist into the palm of his other hand. 'Not head-on.'

Gilling nodded agreement. He looked below to where the road was, then along the path slanting into the trees; finally, up at the crest just above the village. He sensed that Nay Dun was watching him, urging him to decide about the company's re-deployment, but he seemed to have become stupid and couldn't imme-

diately think what needed to be done. ('Call yourself a soldier, Mr. Gilling?'—the echo was still there.) He badly needed the reassurance of another opinion, but he was damned if he would seek Nay Dun's. Long seconds passed while he vacillated, staring at the stunted ghost of his shadow lying at the subedar's feet. They hadn't much time—that he knew. Another patrol would be on its way to investigate the cause of the firing—perhaps more than a patrol—and yet he couldn't adjust his mind to the urgent necessity of exending their front. He kept telling himself that they were down to twenty-five men; that it was too late to do anything worthwhile.

He saw Nay Dun shift his legs impatiently and the movement accelerated his decision. Without confidence in it he said: 'We'll defend the village. One Bren section will cover the demolition. The remainder are to deny the path and the crest.' He paused, ready even now to find fault with the plan, then fastened on to it once and for all. 'I'm going to the road, subedar. Get the sections into position as soon as they come up.'

He jarred down to road-level, ordering the men to the village as he passed. The Bren sited nearest the road he had shifted lower on to a commanding point directly in front of the demolished shelf. 'Dig in,' he said to the raw-eyed crew, 'and use camouflage. It'll be daylight before much longer.'

Saw Tun Shwe followed him. He limped back to the rear, another decision arrived at. The mules stood lop-eared in the navy-blue darkness and the cooks, presumably roused by the firing, squatted close by. They got up sheepishly as Gilling approached. The only sound was a delirious mumbling from one of the

wounded—that, and the scratching irritation of the night which Gilling had practically ceased to hear.

To the senior cook he said tersely: 'How many are dead?'

'Four, thakin.'

He had forgotten whether that was more than at the end of the march, but he was concerned only with the living. Four from eleven meant seven. . . . He found himself a patch of moonlight and, leaning against the high bank, fumbled notebook and pencil from his shirt pocket. In swift, shaky capitals he wrote:

TO O–C GYOBIN
FROM O–C 'A' COY 2ND FRONTIER RIFLES
TIME 0410 HRS
MESSAGE BEGINS.
IMPOSSIBLE TO HOLD ROAD BANDAUNG–GYOBIN FOR MORE THAN FEW HOURS. COMPANY DOWN TO PLATOON STRENGTH. PRESENT ENEMY STRENGTH ESTIMATED AT LEAST TWO COMPANIES WITH PROBABILITY OF MOTORIZED REINFORCEMENTS. BANDAUNG ALREADY OCCUPIED. ESCARPMENT DEMOLITIONS PLUS DESTRUCTION OF ROAD AT TENTH (10TH) MILESTONE WILL PROBABLY PREVENT MOTORIZED ADVANCE FOR SOME TIME YET. AM COVERING TENTH MILESTONE AND NEIGHBOURING VILLAGE BUT EXPECT COMPANY WILL BE OVERRUN BY NEXT ATTACK. I SAY AGAIN—YOU MUST ASSUME ROAD TO GYOBIN OPEN TO ENEMY INFANTRY BY THE TIME YOU RECEIVE THIS.
MESSAGE ENDS.

He couldn't remember the date or what day it was. The paper was damp with sweat and, in places, had taken the pencil badly. He traced the more doubtful words over heavily, then read the message through. He had written in haste, as sensibly as his mind would

allow, and only as he signed his name did he feel the chill of doom. Time and again he had somehow warded off the thought of final disaster. Since they were driven from the escarpment there had been no hope worth clinging to and he had existed from hour to hour, from minute to minute, blinding himself to where they were all leading. But now, as if someone else had written the truth, a yawning emptiness seemed to pierce the core of his exhaustion—a dull, cold vacuum such as a man might feel when the stays of execution had at last run out.

He stared at the lined sheet of paper for a long time before tearing it from the book and folding it in half. The senior cook responded to his gesture and came closer. Weaponless, without webbing, he looked like a dishevelled scoutmaster.

'Listen carefully,' Gilling began. He tapped the paper. 'This is a message to the senior British officer in Gyobin. At all costs you're to see that it's delivered.'

The cook frowned, unaccustomed to such responsibility. Patiently, Gilling recounted what he must do, stressing the urgency, the vital need for the note not to miscarry. Some of the phrases he used kept reminding him of the debacle of the bus and the bitter fact that hope *had* existed recently—just for a while.

'Have you got all that?'

'Yes, thakin.'

'Repeat what you've been told.'

The cook plucked nervously at some hairs poking through a mole on his chin. He spoke parrot-fashion, with some hesitation. Gilling was taking his reliability on trust, but he had made up his mind that only the noncombatants could be spared.

'It's fifteen miles to Gyobin.' He made allowances for the man's condition. 'See that you get there by no

later than eleven hundred hours. Have you got a watch?'

'Yes, thakin.'

'Very well, then.' They checked the time together. 'Get started at once.'

The cook hesitated. 'What do I do when I have delivered the message?'

'Wait in Gyobin.'

'For you, thakin?'

'No.' Gilling shook his head. 'Wait for Colonel Church and the battalion.'

He watched the man gather up his haversack and, apparently oblivious of his good fortune, trudge away. The delirious rifleman babbled an unwitting farewell and Gilling pushed himself off the bank, stepping carefully between the wounded. He had a duty towards them; owed them something. There was lead in his heart and yet, inexplicably, he felt more in control of himself than for a considerable time. He called Saw Tun Shwe and the remaining cooks together; moved clear of the animals and dumped loads. Of the seven casualties who still lived he doubted if more than half would survive the journey to Gyobin, but he was determined to give them the chance to escape. The long-drawn agony of what he proposed for them was better than the only alternative.

To the cooks he said. 'I don't care how you do it but you're to get the wounded down to the plain. You've got five sound mules and one lame one. Between the lot of you you can manage it.' They began to protest that it was impossible but he cut them short. 'Some of them will be able to ride: some will have to be roped on. And one at least will have to be carried between you.' Seeing their continued disbelief he thought angrily: God, you don't know what I'm giving you.

But he said: 'I want you all out of here in fifteen minutes from now.'

One of them insisted: 'It will kill them, thakin.'

He wanted suddenly to shout at them—to remind them of the naik and rifleman with the laced-up mouths, of Rance, of the prisoners roped together below the escarpment.

Then the other said doggedly: 'What about our cooking equipment?'

'Leave it,' he rasped. 'Leave everything except waterbottles.'

He dismissed them abruptly and turned away; walked forward again, almost begrudging them their release. Saw Tun Shwe started to come with him but he sent him back. 'Help them,' he said. 'See that they hurry.' An afterthought struck him and he extracted the handful of fibre identity discs that had accumulated in his ammunition-pouch. 'Get them to take these—and those of the other four.'

The line of his orderly's mouth weakened a fraction as the implication dawned on him. He looked up at Gilling, as dutiful as ever, 'And then, thakin?'

'Carry the bodies to where you said you wanted them. You'll find me somewhere there.'

He made the climb slowly. His right leg was more useless than painful and he kept stumbling. But his mind had cleared. He had shed the burden of the wounded; warned Gyobin. A sense of inevitability had grown in him from the moment he put his name to the message and he was gradually coming to terms with it. By the time he reached the village he was in the grip of resignation. Weariness was slowly caving in on him again. Nay Dun pointed out the dispositions he had made and he criticized some of them, finding fault out of a need to sustain the quivering hostility

which, he knew, was his only shield against the inevitable processes of fear; the only springboard for the longed-for redemptive opportunity.

They were as good as finished. He admitted it now; accepted it. And ached and trembled.

Another patrol nosed near the demolition soon after five. The gunner covering the road withheld his fire and let them withdraw. Ten minutes later they found the path as they probed the slopes of the hill. There they clashed with an outlying Karen section. The action was brief and inconclusive. The patrol melted away, leaving two dead, and the strained vigil continued. A pre-dawn hush flooded through the forest—a strange absence of sound, uncanny in its intensity. Then the first birds began to sing and the darkness started to drain out of the lifeless air. The light gathered slowly, grey and shadowless, and on the crest and around the village Gilling and the Karens watched the crab-red dawn swell and take shape.

CHAPTER FIVE

IT WASN'T long before they heard the bombers droning through the haze above the hidden plain. Vainly they searched westwards, and as the men nearest him lifted their heads Gilling could observe what the night had done to them. And they, in turn, saw his raw, feverish eyes and hollowed, unshaven cheeks and the way his skin was stretched almost to splitting-point over the gleaming bone-contours. They had aged together; grown sick and hungry.

The bombers unloaded and the haze seemed to quake as the muffled crump of the explosions spread over the foothills to the village and beyond. There had been a time when Gilling had welcomed these distant proofs of the division's continued existence. They had been his one link with the hazardous plain; a paradoxical reminder of the security of numbers. It had seemed to him that, after the jungle, the open spaces could never again unleash terrors which were insupportable. In desperation he had clung to the prospect of being reunited with the battalion and finding himself part of a force increased three times over by the arrival of the Chinese. All along, Gyobin had been more to him than a goal to be reached by the fourth morning; offered more than the promise of an end to everlasting retreat and the threat of encirclement. It was a door through which he had thought he might find himself again; shake off the nightmare. But now, as he listened to the dull throb of the enemy bombers returning south, he was quite without illusions. Gyobin was still a whole day and night away

and he had twenty-five men. What was happening on the plains was another war; not his. He was here, and only a miracle would bring the two of them together again.

He had positioned himself to one side of the village so that he could see something of the road and keep an eye on both the path and the crest. The structure of the company had completely broken down and the Karens were grouped irrespective of their original section or platoon. The last of the ammunition had been shared out; the final stage-settings made. Only the tightening hold of suspense remained. The sun lifted clear of the rim and a fever-bird started on its maddening, ascending scale. 'You're ill,' it shrilled. 'You're ill . . . . You're ill.' A slight breeze came in from the east, shuffling the leaves of the bamboo thickets on the slopes, whirring the feathery ornaments which decorated the altar tables. It didn't last and the air grew stagnant again, heavy with returning heat and the stale smell of the empty village. High in the plastic sky a trio of vultures soared on the strengthening up-currents, tracing wide, invisible circles over the place where Saw Tun Shwe had deposited the dead Karens. Under their covering of flies the bodies seemed to move like enormous living grubs, and no matter where Gilling looked his gaze eventually came back to the discoloured, apparently-squirming shapes that lay between him and the path.

When he could endure the sight of them no more he withdrew cautiously to the rear of the village and made his way up to the crest above. In the far distance he could just make out the fawn-green plain. Northwards, beyond the jumble of huts, the road showed occasionally on its winding descent through the jungle-clad hills, and he wondered anxiously how far the first

cook had got; where the others with the wounded were. They would need all the start he could win them.

Nay Dun was on the crest with eight men and a Bren: the remainder were dug in around the village. The position dominated the approach to the clearing. To enter the village the Japanese would first need to occupy the crest or make it untenable—and they'd be able to do either at will. Daylight only confirmed what Gilling had known from the first.

The subedar was so well camouflaged that Gilling had some difficulty in finding him. There was plenty of cover and he stood up at the mention of his name. The tireless ease with which he could still move was a rebuff in itself and the yellowed, bloodshot eyes seemed to say: 'I'll outlast you yet—no matter what.'

Gilling fought the obsession down. 'Any sign?'

'No sign—but they are there.'

'How do you know?'

'I can feel it.'

Gilling's nerves tightened. The semi-circular barrier of trees into which the path funnelled was steeped in its own shadow, dark and impenetrable. Nothing moved or showed itself—and yet they were there: he trusted the subedar's animal instinct. He switched his gaze to the stunted huts below; looked down on the spindly bamboo tables and saw that they were empty. The chill of superstition shivered through him, of supernatural evils beyond his comprehension. He belonged elsewhere. Not here. His mind hammered it out in a sort of panic. Not here. . . . The fly-crusted bodies of the dead were laid out like a sacrifice but the spirits had gone hungry and would demand more. . . .

'You're ill,' the fever-bird called again. 'You're ill. . . .'

He glanced quickly at Nay Dun's hairless, toffee-

coloured face. The narrow eyes met his and he read into them: 'But for you we would not be where we are now. We would have done better—at the bridge, on the escarpment, with the bus. Yes, even with the bus. We could have been reinforced but for you; spared this.'

Gilling ran his hands over his mouth in distress; turned about. 'See that ridge?' he pointed unsteadily. It was about a mile behind them. The road lay across it like a length of twisted ribbon. Somewhere on the other side of the ridge it would be starting on its westward swing toward Gyobin; searching for a way down to the plains.

The subedar nodded.

'With any luck we can hold them there for a while.'

'Not for long.' It was grunted out.

'Long enough, maybe. We won't last half an hour in this place.'

The choked cry of a jungle cock split the silence. Gilling swung round in alarm, but all he saw was the matted roof of the forest and the mottled light where the trees ended. His mouth was like a kiln yet, perversely, the greasy streams of sweat still ran.

'That message *must* reach Gyobin. If it doesn't—'

He swayed, suddenly dizzy. Through the lime-green blur he could tell that Nay Dun was reaching towards him with tattooed hands. For a moment it was as if he had entered the tail-end of the dream again. Revulsion made him back away. Then, as his vision cleared, he felt his arm gripped. Viciously, he shook himself free.

'I'm all right,' he muttered, but he thought: Damn you. Damn you. . . . His tongue moved dryly over his lips as the weakness passed. All his accumulated hatred for this man came to a head; inspired a despairing

bravado. 'Listen to me, subedar.' He would justify himself yet. 'They'll have to clear you off here before they go for the village. Hold them as long as you can, then pull back and make for that ridge. I'll cover you out. Understand?'

He was under intense scrutiny, but received no answer.

'Try and check them again on the ridge. Every five minutes will count. Gyobin's got to have as much warning as possible.'

Seemingly unmoved, Nay Dun continued to stare at him through the angled glare. Gilling's hatred faltered a little. He had committed himself and fear knotted in his stomach. He expected some sort of protest from the subedar, or a query like: 'Will you join us on the ridge?' But there was neither. Only the hard. demanding eyes boring into his.

A terrible desolation possessed him. With barely controlled emotion he said: 'You'll be responsible for what happens north of here. You'll be in command.'

He paused.

'*Understand?*'

'Understand, thakin.'

A nod, a parrot-phrase—that was all. Hysterically he thought: Don't you see?—I'm making amends. You can't fault me this time. Don't you see? . . . And then, with horror, he realized that he had proposed exactly what he believed the subedar expected of him.

He retraced his route round to the rear of the village; crawled forward until he found Saw Tun Shwe. It would be here, then. Here. . . . He was imprisoned now as surely as if there were bars of steel around him.

His orderly passed him a bamboo container retrieved from one of the huts and he drank from it

absently, scarcely tasting the flat, warm water. His brain seemed to have gone absolutely numb and for a while he waited in a state of intense apathy, devoid of all sensation. He had sentenced himself, but he couldn't yet grasp the imminence of death.

There was still no hint of the Japanese in the dark caves of the forest wall; no sound other than the morning's stealthy murmur. The vultures grew impatient, planing lower as the sun worked on the bodies. The fever-bird sang intermittently, seeking to impose its will on him. A minute or two passed. Little by little he lost his stunned detachment and once more began to feel afraid. It wasn't so much death itself that terrified him as the manner of its coming, and in dread he shut his mind against the fearful images his thoughts created. He drew his revolver instinctively; broke it and spun the magazine to see if it were full. A huge orange butterfly chopped heavily across the clearing, guiding his bleary gaze up to the crest, and his hatred flared again. There was no other antidote left to him and he let it rage, staring at the bamboo thickets along the skyline where the subedar lay hidden.

Then, with a shock that made his mouth go loose, he heard a shout from somewhere in the trees beyond the path.

CHAPTER SIX

'CAPTAIN GILLING!'

He caught his breath and pressed himself against the ground, head turned sideways, eyes wide.

'Give up, Captain Gilling. . . . It is useless to continue.'

The voice was effeminate; the English distorted by an alien rhythm. This was no Karen; no hopeless appeal made under duress. The high-pitched tone carried a spine-chilling threat. The use of his own tongue singled him out almost more than the mention of his name.

'Give up. Surrender. . . . Save yourself and your soldiers.'

The voice chanted on, sibilant and frightening. At grass-level, Gilling and his orderly faced each other in the short scrub like men engaged in a staring match.

'Surrender. . . . We will wait a few minutes. That is all. A few minutes only. . . . Give up, Captain Gilling.'

There was silence then, but for a while Gilling did not move a muscle. He continued to stare at Saw Tun Shwe as if he were trying to memorize every detail of the drawn, brown pock-marked face.

'Thakin?' His orderly hadn't understood. His lips quivered. 'What do they want?'

Unnerved, Gilling raised his head; peered towards the trees. They want me, he thought, and the very phrase dragged at his scalp. *Me*. . . .

They took their time. But when they came it was

suddenly, the only warning being the hollow *punk* of mortars going into action in the near distance.

One of the vultures was planing down as the shells burst around the clearing and the blast swept it up and away like a heavy kite gone out of control in a gale. Simultaneously the shadowy hollows under the trees became alive with movement. A wave of green-clad figures rose unevenly, emerging into the broken scrub on either side of the path, and Gilling experienced a shrinking sensation at the sight of them; at the familiar sound of their cries. A single shot rang out from the crest as the sun exposed them; another and another. Then the Bren chattered and cut the first gaps in the stumbling line. The scrub was patchy. Where it was comparatively open the oncoming Japanese made more rapid progress. Very soon the line broke into four or five distinct groups, half a dozen or so strong, each man taking on his separate identity as they came closer—hunched, gangling, shabby, theatrical—but all dangerous; all sickeningly intent. The nearest were halfway to the village before the Karens defending the clearing opened up. The result was immediate and startling. Within seconds the attack had disintegrated under the concentrated cross-fire, and in a moment of hopeless clarity Gilling realized with astonishment that the enemy hadn't counted on the crest being occupied.

Another staggered salvo of mortar-shells erupted in and about the huts. The spouting fans of earth collapsed and ochreous veils of dust drifted slowly across the scene. There was still movement in the scrub, still a few survivors trying to regain the safety of the trees, and Brens and smallarms harried them; picked them off.

'Hold your fire!' Gilling bawled. 'Save it!'

An unreal hush descended on the clearing, intense

enough for him to hear a groan from somewhere nearby and the soft, tissue-paper crackling of burning grass. The dust settled and the flies returned in a blue haze to the dead Karens near the bamboo altars. The lull seemed endless, but he knew with certainty what it meant and where it was heading. Through haste or over-confidence the Japanese had made an elementary mistake—one which they wouldn't repeat. For all their preponderance of numbers they wouldn't assault the village again until they controlled the crest. And then it would be easy—a matter of minutes only. . . .

Once more he lifted his eyes to where he knew the subedar to be. You're next, he thought, and a shiver of appeal went through him, compounding with his enmity, weakening it. Hold them, he pleaded. Forget what I said. Don't pull out. For Christ's sake don't pull—

With a sound like soggy corks being drawn the mortars suddenly loosed off again and the sound seemed to stall his brain. He never shifted his gaze from the crest as he waited for the strikes. They pitched roughly where he expected them, with a dreadful certainty—one . . . two . . . three. Hardly had the debris ceased to fly than the top of the crest lifted again under the impact of a second staccato load of high explosive. Even where he lay Gilling felt the flap and suck of the blast. A manure-coloured cloud was spreading down the slope like a creeping avalanche and when the third clutch of shells landed they stabbed orange-bright through swirling murk.

No one could stay up there for long, and what remained of Gilling's spirit withered as he saw what was happening—and how swiftly. His silent, unreasoning appeal wasn't even remotely possible to honour, yet he continued to make it. He seemed to be going out of

his mind; nearing the threshold of irredeemable panic. The pattern he'd foreseen was taking shape before his eyes, shell by shell, and the bravado with which he'd promised Nay Dun support had shrivelled and died.

Stay there, he pleaded shamelessly. Forget about the ridge. . . .

Yet another accurately-placed salvo split the darkening pall which obliterated the crest. He raised himself a little, peering with agonized intent, and as he did so he heard the whip of bullets passing close overhead. A fraction of a second later he was partially stunned by a concussive roar as one of the huts burst into a swelling ball of flame. The village had been under desultory fire almost as long as the crest, yet he'd scarcely been conscious of it. But now, as chunks of flaming thatch and bamboo spattered near, he was shocked into awareness of immediate personal danger. His ears rang as he looked about him. Here and there, prone in the scrub-fringe, he could see a Karen. One or two of them were sniping in the direction of the trees and the waste provoked an involuntary reaction.

'Save it!' he shouted.

They ignored him and continued to shoot. Either they didn't hear or they felt inaction was a crime while their comrades suffered. But to Gilling their continued disregard of him seemed a gesture of rebellion. A dull surge of anger impelled him towards them.

'Save it! Save it!'

Like a madman he scrambled through the scrub. They turned their heads at the approaching sound of his voice, staring at him blankly. He couldn't see that he'd been mistaken in his judgment of them. He felt himself shunned, abandoned to their contempt, and he raged at them out of hurt and bitter loneliness.

The crest was still under bombardment. He spared

it a long glance before starting on his return to Saw Tun Shwe. Metal flipped past and he went flat, coughing as he inhaled smoke from the burning remains of the hut. The air whined under pressure from a falling shell. There was a blinding flash, a noise like a thunder-clap, and the ground seemed to leap under him. He waited a moment before moving again, then got up and ran as well as his maimed leg would allow. His orderly was kneeling, apparently willing him to safety, and as he threw himself alongside Gilling cried: 'Get down!'

'Thakin,' he heard.

With his head cradled into the crook of an arm he sucked acrid, smoke-laden air into his lungs.

'Thakin—'

The voice insisted through the deafening aftermath of the explosion. Yielding to it he discovered to his amazement that Saw Tun Shwe was still kneeling, clutching his stomach as though he'd been winded. With one convulsive movement Gilling pulled him down and rolled beside him. Jets of blood were spurting vividly between the interlocked fingers. Gilling could tell at a glance that there was no hope for him. He'd been hit in the hip and the armpit as well.

'Easy,' Gilling said. 'Take it easy.'

The brown pigment of the Karen's face was taking on a ghastly, greenish hue. His heels drummed frantically against the ground as if he sought to flee from the consuming pain. Only seconds remained to him but they lasted interminably; cruelly. Then his screwed-up eyes slid open like a doll's and, without recognition, fixed themselves on Gilling.

'Take it easy,' Gilling repeated. He said it several times, with hoarse and hopeless gentleness, but it was some moments before he realized that he was talking to

e dead. Automatically he began to grope for the identity disc under the blood-soaked shirt, and the brief, desolate thought came: You were the nearest I got to any of them. . . .

A feeling of utter desolation seized him. His hand came away empty, leaving the disc on its string. For a brief space of time his senses had scarcely registered the din, but now, as if plugs had been snatched from his ears, it enveloped him again. The crest was no longer the focal point of the bombardment: it had switched back to the village. Another hut was on fire and the rest were hazy under the drift of dust and smoke. Some of the rain-starved scrub was beginning to burn. With difficulty he made out the crest, the skyline of which was just discernible. Between the crash of explosions he faintly heard shouting; the rattle of automatics. In alarm he looked along the path towards the trees, believing the final assault was on its way in, and though there was nothing to be seen the instinct of self-preservation welled up deliriously: Move! . . . Get out! They're finished up there. Get out! Make for the ridge yourself. . . .

More shouting: a brittle exchange of rifle-fire. And with sudden, stark dismay he knew that it came from the crest. It hadn't seemed possible that Nay Dun's small party could have survived—yet they had; some of them, anyhow. Under pressure they were retreating along the skyline, and their continued existence robbed him of the wild and selfish hopes that were seeking his domination.

Oh God, he thought. Oh God. Oh God.

An enormous weight seemed to enter his body. He shouted at the Karens scattered around him to engage the crest, but the words were ripped from his mouth by a tornado of blast as shell after shell detonated in

the clearing. Through the tumbling spouts of earth he saw men rise from their positions and start to fall back.

'Stay where you are!'

He waved his arms frenziedly, but they ignored him. Three or four went past; bent over, stumbling.

Don't leave me, his mind cried. Don't leave me. . . .

The clearing erupted again, scarlet and black, and as he opened his eyes he saw that others were on the move.

'Hold it!' he bawled. 'Stay where—'

He never finished it. The roof of the nearest hut collapsed with an abruptness that constricted his throat. He ducked, reflex-fashion, anticipating an explosion, but for some reason there wasn't one. Sidelong, he saw something bounce off the springy bamboo floor of the demolished hut and ricochet ponderously towards him. It seemed to travel through the air with unnatural slow motion, turning lazily as it described an arc, but it wasn't until it hit the ground that he identified it as a mortar-shell. It trundled in his direction, crushing the short grass in its path, finally coming to rest within a few feet of where he lay.

He could have reached out and touched it. In an intensity of awareness he noted green-painted fins; strange hieroglyphics stamped into the banded metal. A blur of heat rose from it. . . . Then his bladder emptied and he entered a new dimension of terror over which he had absolutely no control. One moment he was weighted to the ground; the next he was on his feet running through the crackling smoke—running like someone possessed.

CHAPTER SEVEN

His mind and body were temporarily dissociated—the one petrified, the other in a paroxysm of movement. Head down, he blundered through the flaming village, going he didn't know where. Dimly he was conscious of moments of scorching heat; sensed, rather than saw, figures alongside and ahead of him. All the din in the world seemed to be filling his ears, isolating him from everyone and everything. He burst through blinding curtains of smoke into the equally blinding dazzle of the northern end of the clearing. Five or six Karens were converging on to the track which led into the trees and he swerved towards it himself. Their disorder was contagious; an extension of his own private terror —encouraging it, condoning it.

More shells tore into the shattered village and the fiery blast seemed to free a part of his mind from its traumatic seizure. For a horrified instant he knew what he was doing. No! he thought. No! . . . But he couldn't stop himself. The unexploded mortar-shell had triggered-off a chain-reaction which had stunned his will. He ran on, oblivious of his wound and crippling weariness—going anywhere, anywhere to escape. Fifty yards behind the last of the huts the narrow path began, curving through knee-high grass. He reached it and pounded in pursuit of the Karens ahead of him. Thirty yards more and he was into the beginnings of the trees. Leaves showered down as a burst of fire slashed overhead. Nowhere was safe. The vision of the shell kept pace with him; drove him further into the shadows.

Barely twenty seconds had elapsed since he started to run, but time was destroyed. It was dark under the trees and he tripped; sprawled headlong. The shock of impact sobered him briefly. He was aware of shame, of guilt. Then they were overpowered and he was struggling to regain his feet; lurching deeper into the protection of the trees and thickening undergrowth.

He didn't see that the path was joined by another which came down from the crest. Nor—until the last moment—did he see Nay Dun and the three Karens who were with him. They cannoned into each other at the junction and the subedar's arms enveloped Gilling as he sought to regain his balance.

'Thakin!'

Nay Dun staggered back as Gilling wrenched himself away. He was hatless: blood trickled from his right temple. Dazed from the bombardment he stared at Gilling.

His voice, his eyes, his presence—it was as if Gilling had been hit by a cold douche. Gasping, he met the subedar's gaze; suffered the wordless indictment. Shame and guilt came over him again, this time in great cascade, drenching his fear. He glanced elsewhere, like someone found out, then returned to the subedar's face, mesmerized by what he saw. 'You were going to cover me,' he read. Then: 'You're a coward. . . . *A coward.*'

He shivered; felt sick. His mind was blustering, protesting, yet he heard himself say: 'Hurry! . . . Get going!' and the order rang in his head as if someone else had given it. All but Nay Dun started to move. Revolver in hand, Gilling gestured. 'You too, subedar.'

The firing had lifted. Now there was only the lick and hollow roar of flames.

Nay Dun swayed. 'We go together, thakin.'

'No!'

'Together. . . . Quickly!'

'No!' In him were balanced a longing for life and the demented remains of pride. And pride tipped the scales, tilting his mind towards madness. I'll show you, it cried. I'll show you! . . . Still panting, he stood before the subedar. In English he shouted: 'The ridge, man: the ridge!'

Nay Dun shot an urgent glance along the path. 'Thakin—' he began, and Gilling saw his appeal as a trap; an attempt to prolong and intensify his disgrace.

'That's an order, subedar.' He levelled the revolver. The war had narrowed down to this. With his finger quivering on the trigger he said: 'I won't tell you again,' and his voice was suddenly ablaze with returning hysteria. 'I'll count up to three. If you're still here when I get to three I'll kill you.' He paused fractionally. 'One . . .'

Nay Dun's eyes dropped warily to the revolver. For a long moment he hesitated. Then, abruptly, he capitulated; brought his heels roughly together. Wheeling heel-and-toe, he snapped at the waiting Karens.

'Follow me,' he said.

Seconds later they had vanished into the trees and Gilling was alone in the nightmare of his triumph.

He loped back towards the village, stooping despite his crazed indifference, expecting to meet Japanese there and then; wanting to die. Every hut was on fire, spewing smoke and flame. The other end of the clearing was hidden from him. As he neared the first of the huts he raised an arm, shielding his face against the scorch of heat. The smoke thickened and his eyes streamed. But there were no Japanese. He peered vainly about him as he went forward, looking for

them, needing to find them before the fanatical ecstasy lost its hold.

He passed through the heart of the inferno, searching for the enemy, offering himself for destruction. But there was no one to be seen. Eagerly he stumbled into the clearer air, hoping to find them coming through the scrub. It was deserted. In a strange voice that was no longer his own he called on them to show themselves. The roar of burning drowned his words and his madness faltered a little as he saw that he had only the dead for company.

A hut caved in. The leaping tongue of flame spat sparks into a whirling spiral of smoke. He staggered away from the hot gust as if something invisible had shouldered into him. The raving impulse which had brought him there was going to waste. Every second made him more vulnerable. It was happening quickly. Already he was unable to proceed through the scrub towards the trees. He'd only to start walking; to start shooting.... But he couldn't. *Couldn't.*

Tears poured from his smarting eyes. More of the madness went out of him. He ran in dismay to where his orderly's body lay; threw himself beside it. The mortar-shell was there, too, but it held no terrors for him now. There were worse things. He was remembering Rance and the barbarisms near the bridge. A shadow slid over the ground and a vulture swooped in to land on one of the bamboo shrines. There were others in the sky, less bold, but as evil, complementing his enveloping fear. He was growing sane again—able to think and reason and imagine; becoming himself.

Burnt wafers of thatch drifted down. The clearing bounced in and out of focus, water-waved with heat and tears. He reached across for Saw Tun Shwe's rifle. Dead though he was, his orderly seemed unwilling to

let it go. There was a grenade hooked on to his belt and Gilling took that as well. After loosening the pin he placed the grenade against the mortar-shell and tamped it into position, metal touching metal, with handfuls of earth. He did this out of a cunning that was the product of the dwindling remnants of hysteria, insuring himself against being taken alive.

By the time he had finished it was as if all his strength had gone. The vulture planed heavily from its perch, landing with a short, stiff-legged run. It craned a bald pink head, making its choice. The stench from the stale dead wafted across the clearing. Flames crackled; smoke curdled like incense around the base of the high, comfortless altars.

A few more seconds elapsed, but still the scrub remained empty. Gilling lay between the shell and his orderly, trembling on propped elbows. The limp, last-minute nausea of the scaffold was in him. He felt as though he were slipping away from himself; in danger of blacking-out. But the horror of capture crawled clammily over his skin, reviving him. Endless though each second seemed his mind made less and less use of them. He looked from the trees down to the nestling shell and grenade that had the power to release him, then back to the trees again. Fear was gaining on him all the time, restoring the yearning to live. And in savage desperation he gave himself up to loathing of the man who, from the very beginning, had demanded more of him than he'd known he could give—asking it without mercy and an endless contempt.

The Japanese waited two minutes after lifting their bombardment before venturing towards the village. They came out of the trees, wary yet confident, walking in line through the scrub. Gilling delayed until the

nearest was fifty yards away before shooting him. The crack of the rifle surprised the others and he'd fired twice more before they recovered their wits. Then some of them saw him and lowered their weapons, thrusting the long bayonets forward as they broke into a charge.

Cringing close to the shell he pulled the pin from the grenade. In the rushing seconds that remained to him he tried to tell himself that this, too, would be a sort of victory.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NAY DUN was four hundred yards along the road when he and the men with him heard the explosion. Momentarily he checked his stride; half turned his head. The sound rumbled away through the forest and the silence which followed was long and lasting. He could only guess at what had happened, but he knew for sure they hadn't much time.

'At the double!' His voice was like a whiplash. 'Move, I said! . . . Keep together!'

The straggling group responded. They went at a shambling jog-trot through the glittering heat of the morning. There were twelve of them altogether and somehow he kept them going, goading them, nursing them, never sparing himself. Ten minutes later they were labouring up the final twist of road that led to the top of the ridge. The Bren-gun crew which had covered the demolition was with them and he selected their position before siting the exhausted riflemen. He did it without haste, yet without hesitation, his practised eye rapidly appreciating the lie of the ground; the best lines of fire.

When he was satisfied that nothing more could be done he took out his binoculars and put them on to the village. Smoke rose from it like a funeral pyre, solid and vertical against the bleached sky. For almost a minute he studied it, together with the intervening stretches of road that were visible. And, eventually, he found what he was seeking—the beginnings of a long, double file of marching Japanese.

He turned and clambered on to an anthill where

his haggard compatriots could see him. Blood was glued into his black cropped hair and his chest heaved. He looked at them with burning eyes.

'Brothers,' he said loudly. 'The captain thakin is dead. I am in command now.'

He paused, drawing himself up. A muscle in his cheek was twitching but his tone was as harsh and emotionless as ever.

'We have killed Japanese before, and soon we will kill others. But remember this—it is time we are fighting. Time. What little extra we can win will help our comrades on the plains. That is why we are here—why we must try again.'

He paused once more, straddling his legs, and when he continued it was with a fierce dignity.

'I was a soldier before some of you were born and have served under many officers. They were soldiers all their lives—like you and me; like Colonel Church and Captain Abbott. But Captain Gilling was not. Everything was strange to him—his uniform, the jungle, you and I. When he came to us at the beginning I thought he would never learn to lead us. But he did—a little more each day. I do not lie to you. You saw it happening yourselves.'

Nay Dun cast a glance over his shoulder. The head of the Japanese column was less than half a mile away.

'For a year I was at his side, watching him, admiring him, seeing him grow into what he became. Do not ask me what made him so. He was not easy to know. But if he—who was not a soldier—could act as he did, then so can we. . . .'

The village burned in the distance and the long column came on.

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